

LAWRENCE KADZITCHE

SLAY QUEEN



COLLECTED SHORT STORIES

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LAWRENCE KADZITCHE

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The characters and situations in this book are entirely imaginary and bear no relation to any real person or actual happening.

For
Martha Kadzitche
Vaya con Dios

A Bag of Tools
By: R. L. Sharpe

Isn't it strange that princes and kings,
And clowns that caper in sawdust rings,
And common people like you and me
Are builders for eternity?

Each is given a bag of tools,
A shapeless mass, a book of rules;
And each must make – ere life has flown –
A stumbling block or a stepping stone.

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Miss Right

They say people find marriage partners anywhere. Some meet their better half at church. Others at parties. Others just bump into each other, say, somewhere. In extreme cases others even meet at funerals. Handsome Johnny did not know where he would meet his future wife but he knew he would meet her somewhere one day.

He was one of those men who are endowed with looks that women find irresistible. And that is where the Handsome sobriquet got appended to his name. Apart from that, he had the other thing that is even more important to women than mere looks: money. So it was not surprising that women chased after him like dogs on heat.

Despite the attention women showered him with, Johnny was not a man who got carried away by women. He had a strict upbringing and had promised himself that he would take his time to choose the woman he would marry.

“Marriage is a lifetime commitment,” he would say. “So it is important to choose your marriage partner very carefully.”

Gordon, his best friend, agreed that this was true but thought he was taking rather too long. Johnny was now thirty-five and all his age mates were already married but he was still single and looking for Miss Right. Gordon began to get worried that his friend would never get married.

Of course it was good news but you can imagine Gordon’s astonishment when Johnny suddenly announced that he had finally found the woman of his dreams.

“I can’t believe it,” exclaimed Gordon. “Where did you find the princess? On Mars?”

Johnny laughed. “Right here on earth, my friend. I met her a month ago in a bar.”

Gordon looked confused. “What do you mean you met her in a bar?”

“Exactly what you think I mean. I met her in a drinking joint at Kamba,” Johnny said calmly.

Gordon smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “Get serious, Johnny, this is no joking matter. Where did you meet the angel that has captured your heart?”

Johnny closed his eyes and it was as if he was back in the bar on the day he met her. He had just entered the bar when he saw her. She stood alone with her back against the counter at one end of the bar playing with her cell phone. He was not aware that he had stopped midway to the counter and was staring at her while almost drooling like an idiot.

Of medium height and very light in complexion, she was in a shimmering green dress, which although not so close fitting, revealed in a subtle way an imposing body with jutting breasts tapering to a slender waist and then widening to curvaceous hips. Out of a small hat tilted rakishly towards one eye flowed black hair which framed her face to below her beautiful jawline. He fathomed her age to be around twenty-five.

Something made her aware of his gaze and she looked up. When their eyes met, Johnny knew with amazing certainty that his search for a woman was over. He was even surprised to see that he saw the same thing in the woman’s eyes.

Giving her an embarrassed smile, he tottered to the counter, ordered a drink and hopped on a stool. While he sipped his drink, he turned his eyes on her from time to time, each glance adding up to the store of her impressions he was building in his head.

Johnny noted that she did not have any makeup even on her wide and sensual mouth. Her face, majestically beautiful, had natural smoothness not that born out of mascara that is so common in many women. Even her fingernails were trimmed short and not painted.

He tried to ignore her but found that this was an impossibility. And whenever their eyes met, he had a feeling that she, too, was studying him.

Now this was not the first time for Johnny to see a girl in a bar. In fact, although married, his best friend Gordon professed himself as an expert of prostitutes. He enjoyed their company, bought them drinks, danced with them and whenever an opportunity availed itself he would sleep with them.

“My mama always said it’s good to share,” Gordon would defend himself. “All these sweet girls are here to coin money so we should all be good enough to share the little we have with them.”

You would think that being Gordon’s close friend, Johnny was also into prostitutes. Not at all. Like Gordon he enjoyed their company, talking to them and buying them drinks, but that was all. Women were not his weakness. Due to his strict upbringing, his father being a fiery pastor of some fanatical obscure religious sect, he had grown up being told sex outside marriage was a sin. Although he had rebelled and left the church when he grew up, his views on sex outside marriage did not change. He planned to take time to look for his other half and only after he had tied the knot with her would he then have sex with her. So all attempts by Gordon to make him bed any of the girls failed.

However, not even once did he see the girl as a prostitute. What he saw was a woman. He wanted this woman but did not know how to approach her.

“Who’s that girl?” he asked the bartender.

“Joyce. She’s new here. Some woman she is. Comes here but doesn’t hook any man. Don’t know what her game is,” the bartender paused, winked at Johnny, then lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Wanna try your luck?”

Johnny smiled. “Guess so. Offer her a drink.”

The bartender served her the drink and she thanked him by clasping her hands together and bowing her head.

“Also ask her if she would like some snacks,” Johnny told the bartender.

The response did not come with the barkeeper. A whiff of subtle perfumed enveloped Johnny and he raised his head like a dog trying to trace the source of a delicious aroma. The girl stood beside him.

“Hi, I’m Alicia,” she said proffering her hand. “May I know my benefactor?”

“I...I’m Johnny,” he stammered taking her hand.

“I’ll accept your offer for the snacks if you say we’ll eat together,” she said with a smile.

“Suggestion accepted,” he replied promptly.

“Barman, give us the snacks,” she said in a sing song voice to the bartender then turned to Johnny. “Let’s go and sit down.”

They went to sit down on a sofa in one corner of the bar. They talked while they

drank. The girl was easy to talk to and full of humour.

“The bartender told me your name was Joyce,” Johnny said irrelevantly.

She removed her hat and set it on her lap. “What I told you is my real name,” she said with a smile.

Johnny laughed. “Why did you tell me your real name?”

She looked at him in the eye. “Because my heart told me that was the right thing to do.”

Johnny’s eyes caught sight of a brutish looking man who was trying to catch Alicia’s attention by winking at her. “Your friend?” he asked casually.

“No,” she replied. “That’s what I hate most about this life; the people you’re forced to consort with.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I’m not here because I like this life,” she said softly. “I’m an orphan. I used to live with my aunt. My uncle wanted to rape me and when I told my aunt, she turned against me, accusing me of trying to destroy her family. I was thrown out of the house and ended up here.”

Johnny did not know what made him say it but he said, “I’ll take you out of this place and make you my wife.”

Alicia looked into his eyes. “You mean it,” she said with disbelief.

At this point, Gordon intruded into the story. “You mean you believed her story? Promised to marry a prostitute you just met in a bar?”

“Why not? Just as she trusted her heart to tell me her real name, I also trusted my heart to believe her story,” Johnny said.

“And then?”

“I proposed love to her,” Johnny said.

Gordon took a deep breath. “You proposed love to a prostitute?”

“No, I proposed love to a woman whom I met in a bar,” Johnny countered.

“A woman one meets in a bar is called a prostitute.”

“And what do you call the man who meets the prostitute in the bar?” returned Johnny.

“Don’t be hypothetical, Johnny. This is a serious matter. I’m surprised you bought the stupid sob story she told you about being chucked out by her aunt. That was all bullshit meant to gain your sympathy.”

“Nope. I know it was true,” Johnny said with conviction.

“Okay, let’s say it was true but that doesn’t justify her being found in a bar,” Gordon said.

“Maybe you’re right but that’s not the point. The point is that I love her and I’m going to marry her.”

“Marry a prostitute?”

“Yes,” Johnny answered with finality.

Gordon was incredulous. “You spend all these years looking for a woman and you end up marrying a prostitute? Why?”

“To you, she’s a prostitute. To me, she’s just like any other woman. I love her and she

loves me. My heart tells me she'll make me a very good wife."

"Wise up, man. A prostitute is a prostitute. In anything she does, it's about money, pure business. There's no love involved."

"Nope, I know this one loves me," Johnny said. "She's there because of problems."

Gordon laughed. "Whores are whores because they want to be whores and nothing else. The sad stories they feed you are intended to gain your compassion so that they can easily relieve you of your money."

Johnny shook his head. "You don't understand..."

"There's nothing to understand. You deal with a whore on a pay as you go basis—nothing permanent..."

"Not everyone is a whore because they want to be one. Others are forced into prostitution by circumstances. Given a chance they would make excellent wives."

Gordon looked at Johnny disbelievingly. "Johnny, you know I'm an expert as far as prostitutes are concerned. I've experience with all their types, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. They're incapable of loving. Everything they say is a lie. The only thing they value is money. Forget about her. There are so many good girls out there, why ruin your life by marrying a prostitute?"

"To me the best girl is Alicia. I love Alicia and I know she loves me. I'll take her out of that bar and make her my wife," Johnny said.

Gordon's arguments fell on deaf ears. "You'll regret this decision," he said resignedly. "That woman will bring you nothing but grief."

When Johnny broke the news to his parents and relatives, they also opposed him vehemently.

"There's no way we can allow you marry a woman of such loose morals," they contended.

"She isn't of loose morals," he defended her. "It was just circumstances that made her to be found in the bar. Maybe it was even God who sent her there so that I could meet her."

They all agreed the girl had bewitched him and they must therefore find a witch doctor to break the spell. But all the witchdoctors they consulted failed to break the spell. "She has very strong juju," the witchdoctors justified their failure.

Johnny's marriage ceremony to Alicia was heavily patronised by both his friends and relatives. They all wanted to see with their own eyes the bar girl, as they called Alicia, who had stolen Handsome Johnny's heart. Most hoped against hope that some other man Alicia had known in her other life would appear and cause a scene and therefore break the unfortunate marriage before it went far. But Alicia, at ease and all smiles, in a white wedding dress, was the perfect bride.

"I hope you'll not regret this decision," Gordon, who was his best man said. "You know people have made bets that this marriage won't last a year tops."

"I'll prove them wrong, buddy," Johnny said.

To most people's disappointment, the wedding ended without the slightest glitch. Johnny and Alicia settled into married life. There were a lot of visitors to their house.

Most of them were Johnny's friends and relatives. They came frequently. Their fake smiles masked the real reason for their visits. They were there to witness first-hand the problems they thought Johnny would face with Alicia.

But Alicia proved to be a very good home maker. She was a great cook, kept the house spotlessly clean and conducted herself impeccably well in public. She was the epitome of a good wife and they all came to envy the way she was devoted to Johnny. They had thought she would be cheating on him but she did not. She became a devoted Christian and together they became born again Christians. She later became the leader of the women's guild of the church and Johnny a church elder. They were blessed with five children and their family was taken as a model family in the community.

Sad to say Gordon's family broke up after he found his wife in bed with a man in their matrimonial home. But not even once did Alicia cheat on Johnny. When Johnny told his story at the fiftieth anniversary of their marriage, it was a testimony of how a person's love and trust of another human being can change that person into a good person.



Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Pastor

A gust of icy cold wind hit the pastor's face when he opened the bedroom window. Birds and insects chirped and chattered, happy that the rain that had fallen all night long had finally let up. But Pastor John Kalebe knew otherwise. The sky was still overcast with dark clouds. It would just be a matter of time before the rains started again.

"You should be on your way, dear," a voice said behind him.

He turned. It was Paulina, his wife. He had not heard her return to the bedroom. A glance at his expensive Rolex showed that it was 7:00 am, exactly the time he had planned to leave.

"You're right, honey," he said and then taking her hands in his, he added, "Let us pray."

The prayer started on a soft note, but as is usually the case with Pentecostal pastors, his voice rose gradually. Soon, he was shouting, invoking the blood of Jesus to protect him during the journey and bind the devil and all evil powers. To the prayer, Paulina added a chorus of tongue praying spiced with a lot of alleluia and amen.

When he finished his prayers, ten minutes later, he was drenched in sweat. Paulina picked his suitcase and he followed her out of the bedroom. In the lounge, Sonia, his maid relieved her of the travel case. Sonia had scarcely gone out of the house when she shrieked with horror.

They ran outside and found the maid frozen with terror on the verandah. She was staring at a small dead bird on the floor. Kalebe recognized it as a nocturnal bird called nkhwezule.

"This is bad luck," Sonia screeched. "When this bird dies, something really bad happens."

The pastor put a fatherly arm on the housemaid's shoulder. He knew where Sonia's fear stemmed from. Because the bird came out only at night, people associated it with witches and evil spirits. It was not uncommon to see people shudder when the bird chirped at night and murmur with fear that a witch was on the loose. But Sonia was a born again Christian and as such she was not expected to believe in such mumbo jumbo.

"Sonia, this is just a bird like any other bird," he pointed out. "It hit the wall and died. That's all."

But the house maid was not convinced. "Pastor." She always called him pastor. "Pastor, back home, we found a dead bird like this outside my brother's house and three days later he died in his sleep."

"That was a mere coincidence, Sonia," Kalebe assured her. "We who are born again Christians should make no concessions to any superstitions."

And to illustrate his point, he picked the dead bird and threw it carelessly into the shrubs.

"But be careful, anyway," Paulina said trying to sound as casual as possible. "You never know."

"Paulina, Paulina," Kalebe said in a reproachful manner, "That's blasphemous coming from a pastor's wife. We are Christians, and superstitions have no room in our lives."

He picked the suitcase Sonia had dropped and walked to the white Mercedes Benz

parked outside. The moment he got into the car and started the engine, the heavens opened again. He lowered the window, blew his wife a kiss, quickly rolled it up again and then drove off into the blinding rain.

His destination was Blantyre, where he had been invited to be the main speaker at a religious revival crusade which was beginning the following day.

The downpour deteriorated into a storm. Gusts of wind driven rain whipped the car mercilessly so that he could hardly see. The streets, usually full on a Saturday morning, were eerily empty. It was obvious one had to have compelling reasons to venture out. His headlights on, the wipers slashing angrily at the rain streaming down the wind-screen, the car crawled along the tarmac road.

He was in no hurry and killed time by rehearsing the sermon he would deliver at the crusade. After the revival meeting, he expected to set up a new branch in Blantyre. An additional branch meant increased membership and consequently enhanced collections.

The thought brought a wry smile to his face. Just five years ago, he had been eking out a living as a teacher at one of the primary schools in the slums of the city. Then he had received the Lord's call, quit the job, and founded the church.

And as the church's slogan confirmed, the Lord was really good all the time. Starting with just a few people, his congregation had mushroomed to fill the city hall where they met. Thanks to the generosity of his flock, he now lived in the sprawling rented bungalow in the elegant Area 43 suburb. His five children were learning at expensive private boarding schools and his wife was able to go shopping in South Africa. He had overheard the church elders say they planned to buy him a maize mill as his birthday gift this year. God was really working miracles for him.

He recalled a Presbyterian reverend who asked him how he managed to convince his flock to give to him so generously. "They don't give to me," he had replied blandly. "They give to God and they know God will give back abundantly." To himself he added; "I will not be surprised if they buy me a private jet in a few years."

The rain eased to a drizzle by the time he reached the outskirts of the city. He picked up speed. And that's when he saw her. She stood by the road, a tall figure in a bright yellow raincoat that reached down to her ankles. A large bag was slung across her left shoulder.

It was the pastor's habit never to offer a lift to strangers. There were great dangers in doing so. He had heard more than enough stories of unsuspecting drivers being robbed or even killed by thugs they had kindly offered a lift to.

The girl ahead did not wave him down. She brought down her pointing finger imperiously, then indicated with her thumb the direction she was going. The gesture raised the pastor's curiosity. Slowing down, he could clearly see the girl's white teeth bared in an expectant smile. He found himself shifting into a lower gear. Surely there would be no danger from a lone girl shivering in the rain. His mind made up, he pressed his foot on the brake pedal. The car came to a halt beside the girl.

"Get in," he said as he leaned over and opened the passenger door.

“Thanks a lot,” she said, scuttling into the car. “I was wondering whether I was not going to melt out there like Kamdothi. Honey, you know the story of Kamdothi?”

Of course, he knew the tale just as every child who had grown up in the village did. It was a popular tale about a woman who had no children. She liked to mould toys made of clay and pretended they were children. One day, one of the clay toys became a real child. She named her Kamdothi, meaning made of clay. However, it was obviously necessary that the child should never be touched by water or she would melt.

Without waiting for his reply, girl went on, “The tale went with a lovely song. Something like,” she paused closed her eyes and sang, “Kamdothi run away from the rain.” She opened her eyes and said dreamily. “I grew up with my grandmother. She was very good. But good things do not last, you know.”

“What happened?” the pastor asked.

“Well, the usual story, sweet. She died; blah blah blah.” She paused and shrugged, “The important thing is I am here, little me.”

She threw back the hood of her raincoat to reveal a moon-shaped face framed by pitch-black wavy hair cascading to her shoulders. Her light complexion showed the use of skin lightening creams.

“Babe, I’m headed for Blantyre for a Revival Crusade which will take place tomorrow,” she said throwing her bag on the back seat. “I was so worried I would miss the great event.”

The pastor smiled. “God always has ways of providing our needs, daughter. That’s why I came along.”

She smiled to reveal again a row of snow-white teeth he had espied earlier and stared coquettishly at him. “Oh? Well, I once heard that there are some days when the Lord determines all our actions. So, honey darling, are you also going to the revival?”

Kalebe nodded without taking his eyes off the road.

“Let the Lord be praised,” she said, rolling her eyes. “There is some big pastor that will be preaching there. I’ve heard his sermons on the radio but never had a chance to meet him. They are very powerful and enlightening. I’m sure you’ll enjoy the event.”

“Actually, I’m that pastor,” he said with a smile, allowing himself a moment of pride.

“Holy mother Mary! This is a blessed day for me,” she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Seeing you in jeans and a pullover, you look more like some handsome movie star than a pastor. Cowboy, you’re a lady killer.”

Kalebe blushed and took a deep breath. “Remember, I am a pastor,” he pointed out weakly. “I would be grateful if you could address me as such.”

The girl laughed. “Pastor to your flock, to me your little moi, you are sweetie.”

The pastor turned to tell her that he was past forty and fit to be her father. However, as his eyes encountered her provocative smile, the words died in his throat.

The rain had picked up again, pattering on the roof, gushing down the windscreen and forming an almost impenetrable curtain ahead of him.

“Bad weather, I wish the rain would stop,” he said to the girl, hoping to change the subject.

The girl leaned towards the back seat, dipped her hand into her handbag and fished out several compact discs. “I don’t know which music you enjoy, sugar. I’m into the reggae thing. Bob Marley, Burning Spear, The Maytals, you know.”

Selecting one of the discs, she slotted it into the car’s stereo without waiting for his response. She turned up the volume and Bob Marley’s music filled the car. “I ago tired to see your face,” she sang along in a corrupted version of the song while shaking her body, “Can’t get me out of the race.”

A sunny smile spread on Kaleb’s face. The music reminded him of the days before he became pastor. He had loved reggae too. He found himself nodding his head in rhythm with the music.

“You didn’t tell me your name,” he said, eyeing the girl with some kind of renewed interest.

She looked at him from under her eyelids, biting her fingernails playfully. “Sorry, general. I’m Tadala, but you can call me Tada.”

Glancing at her, the pastor was aware there was something about the girl he couldn’t place. Yes, she was beautiful and exciting but there was something more than that.

But the girl was speaking again. “Gosh, poor me! I should have taken off the rain-coat!”

The vision that emerged out the raincoat made the pastor’s eyes almost pop out of their sockets, his mouth dropping wide open. The girl was in a tight-fitting white blouse that showed her navel. Shapely breasts threatened to burst open her blouse. Flowing out of a miniskirt that barely covered her thighs, were shapely legs that tapered into high heels.

He tried to avert his eyes but failed. On that desolate rainy day, she was like the sun breaking out of dark clouds.

“Do you mind if I make up my face?” Tadala’s voice broke the spell. “The rain spoiled everything.”

“Go ahead,” croaked the pastor, his chest heaving. To him, she looked breathtaking the way she was.

He took several deep breaths to calm his pounding heart. He was confused. What was the meaning of all this? When the girl had said she was going to the crusade, he had assumed she was a born-again Christian. But how could someone who had committed her life to Christ dress like that?

Tadala pulled out a makeup kit from her handbag. He watched her out of the corner of his eyes as she powdered her face, painted her lips and then preened herself in the car’s mirror.

“Honey, how do I look?” she asked, looking as pleased as a cat that has caught a mouse.

The pastor had to admit to himself that she looked devastatingly beautiful. But there was no way he could tell her that.

“Hey, loosen up, handsome,” she purred. “Let me get you something to put you in the mood.”

She retrieved her bag and dug out a bottle, opened it with her teeth and spat out the bottle top.

“Here, have a swig of this, baby. It’ll make you feel good,” she said handing him a bottle of beer.

He shook his head vehemently. What was she up to? Hadn’t he told her he was a pastor?

“Don’t give me that pastor stuff,” she said, reading his mind.

“I’m a Pentecostal pastor,” he croaked faintly. “We don’t touch alcoholic drinks.”

The girl laughed again. “Be honest, beloved. I know of Pentecostal preachers who drink harder than catholic priests. At any rate, don’t worry about your flock finding out. Who will tell them?”

He didn’t answer her. There was nothing to tell her. She wouldn’t understand. He watched her take a long pull of the beer. After that she took out a cigarette. When he turned to protest, she blew smoke in his face and that stopped him. He had a feeling that if he tried to let out a word, a kiss on the mouth would be used to silence him.

“So, you are still a little boy, sweetie?” she asked gaily. “Then let mother sing you something to cheer you up. Twinkle, Twinkle little pastor, how I wonder what you are, here in the car, a beautiful girl by your side.”

The nursery rhyme was infuriating to the pastor but he knew there was little he could do to shut the girl’s mouth short of gagging her. He decided to leave it at that. He would not look or speak to her again until they reached Blantyre.

The beer seemed to tranquilize the girl and as the car was cruising along Zalewa Road, she closed her eyes and fell asleep. At the same time, the weather cleared and the sun appeared.

The pastor couldn’t understand what was happening. Was this a trap thrown at him by the devil? If this was case, then the prince of darkness had made his call in vain. He was a seasoned pastor and had met temptations of all sorts in his calling. He wasn’t going to fall for this one. Not him.

His eyes strayed to Tadala. Fast asleep and breathing softly, she looked so innocent, like an angel. Maybe he had misjudged her. She hadn’t done anything really offensive. Her smoking and beer drinking was wrong, but there were a lot of young women who smoked and drank beer. The curse of modernity.

He was now nearing Blantyre. He admitted to himself that the girl had made the journey seem very short. She looked like a nice young girl and with proper guidance she could be returned to the right path. All he needed to do was make sure she really attended the revival meeting the next day.

“Tadala, Tadala,” he called softly.

But the girl was fast asleep. Eyes on the road, he put out his hand to wake her up. His fingers touched warm, bare flesh. He retracted his hand as if he had touched a red-hot ember. His eyes automatically left the road and fell on the girl. What he saw shook him to the very roots of his soul. It could not be true. He must be dreaming. The girl’s skirt had gone up to her waist. Underneath, she didn’t have a stitch on!

Kalebe's brain refused to believe this. No, this was too much. What shocked him was not the girl's nakedness but the enormity of his error in offering a lift to girl who was not wearing any underwear and was obviously trying to seduce him. His mind willed him to take eyes off the girl but his eyes refused.

Confused, he didn't know that his car was cruising in the middle of the road. As he rounded a corner, that's when he saw the truck. He tried to swerve but it was like dodging a meteorite. His car scraped the side of the truck and rocked violently.

The door on the girl's side was thrown open and she flew out. She crashed on the roadside and rolled into a low ditch. The pastor retained enough presence of mind and wrestled with the car as it danced crazily on the wet tarmac. It came to rest with a crash against an electricity pole.

Kalebe, stunned momentarily, quickly recovered his senses. As he was scrambling out, something caught on his trousers, tearing them. But he paid no heed and limped towards Tadala, who to his horror was lying spread eagled and semi-naked on the grassy roadside.

He bent over her. Surprisingly, she was only slightly bruised. He felt her pulse. It was beating. Overjoyed, he cradled her in his arms. The girl's eyes fluttered open.

Relief flooding his body, he jumped up with joy. He was out of the danger zone. Laughter hit his ears and he stopped. Looking down at him from the side of the road was a group of people which was growing bigger as more people arrived. Someone laughed again pointing at him.

The pastor looked at himself and realized with alarm that his trousers were torn and the waistline was round his thighs. Then his eyes went to the girl who was now sitting up, vainly covering her nakedness with her mini skirt. In the people's eyes and laughter, he saw the accusations and, in that instant, he knew he was doomed.

"Go away!" he howled.

But they just stood there like vultures, laughing as they watched him and the girl.

Oh God, what a position. He knew it would be out that he had been involved in an accident because he was doing immoral things with a girl while driving his car- and imagine, people would add, on his way to a crusade.

As the laughter reverberated in his ears, he could already hear similar laughter as he moved out of the elegant mansion back to the seedy slum, as his children went back to the government school, as he went from place to place looking for a new job. He was finished as a pastor.

"Go away, fools," he shouted again. "What are you looking at?"

But the only answer he got was more laughter.

He wondered what had happened to his prayers. He was not supposed to be experiencing this. Then he remembered Sonia's warning. Maybe he should have paid some attention to what she had said. Why was he having all this misfortune if the dead bird had not signaled bad luck?



The Avenging Housemaid

To be honest, when I was joining Mrs. Gobede's household as a housemaid, I did not have any intention of having an affair with her husband let alone grabbing him as my other half. After all I was just twenty and him fifty. Apart from that he was a born again Christian and I knew things like coveting the maid were far away from his mind.

Mr. Gobede was a very good man. Tall, lean and devastatingly handsome, he treated me no differently from the way he treated his children. But Mrs. Gobede was something else. A loud-mouthed ugly oaf, of the size and shape of a pregnant hippo, she had a quick temper and a coarse way of speaking. I secretly called her Hecate, after the leader of the three witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* although I considered Hecate being of less malevolence than Mrs. Gobede.

It seemed there was nothing I could do right in the house. She would find something wrong with the way I cooked, cleaned the house, washed the clothes or did anything. To her, it was either I did a thing too well, which was a problem or badly, which was also a problem.

In addition, there was always something else I had to do. Bring me a glass of water. Where is the remote control pad? Can you fetch the bible for me? In other words, I worked the whole day without resting.

Knowing that her husband was a nice man, Mrs. Gobede abused me openly only when he was away. Whenever he was home, she would mistreat me discreetly while pretending to be the sweet madam.

What made me survive was that I was very good at my work and good housemaids are not easy to come by. So deep down her heart, Mrs. Gobede knew that I was the best fit for the job. It was just that she was one of those women who never appreciates the good work done by their housemaids.

Their two children took exactly after their mother. Her sixteen-year-old daughter would spare no effort to torture me, ordering me around the house as rudely as she could manage. Her eighteen-year-old brother was even worse. Built along the same lines as her mother, his principal interests in life seemed to be eating, playing video games and of course insulting me. He would talk to me as if I was his girlfriend and even tried to lay his filthy fat hands on me at any available opportunity.

When I complained to Mrs. Gobede about her son's despicable behaviour, she viciously scolded me, declaring that there was no way her son would stoop so low as to lay his hands on a dirty creature like me. Fortunately, both children were at a boarding school and therefore only spent time at home during school holidays. Because of that, the children's insults were not much of a problem but their mother's.

Since I was there to work and not to receive five-star treatment, I put up with Mrs. Gobede's ill-treatment as best as I could. But this changed when Lola, my elder sister, visited me one weekend. During that weekend Mr. Gobede had gone away for a meeting in Lilongwe.

It was an unpleasant morning, hot and filled with frequent gusts of wind. An occasional whirlwind would fill the air with dust and flying garbage. Being in a leafy

suburb, most of the debris were leaves kicked from the ground or plucked from trees.

After completing my morning chores, I made breakfast for Lola. We went to sit on the veranda outside the kitchen. Mrs. Gobede found me giving Lola a cup of tea and some slices of bread.

“What is this thing I’m seeing?” she barked.

The question shocked me. I was allowed to eat breakfast in the house and I had assumed this would apply to my sister as well.

“I...I thought...”

The huge woman I called Hecate snatched the cup of tea and poured its contents on the floor. Then she threw the pieces of bread on the ground and stamped on them.

“How can you be having breakfast when you’ve not cleaned the house yet?”

“Madam, I’ve already cleaned the house,” I answered.

“You’ve already cleaned the house?” she hissed and grabbed me by the collar of my dress. “Let’s go and see.”

We followed her into the sitting room. The room, which was spick and span when I left it, was now littered with leaves and flower petals which the wind had blown in through the open windows.

“You call this room clean?” Mrs. Gobede asked as she dragged me around the room.

“I cleaned the room, madam; it’s the wind that has blown the leaves in,” I replied confidently.

She let go of me and slapped me. “The room was clean! What is this?”

I looked at what she was pointing at. We had all stepped on the tea she had spilled at the veranda and as a result left our footprints as we moved about the living room.

“Then why are these footmarks here if you cleaned the room?”

What is wrong with you, Hecate, I fumed inside. However, before I could answer, Lola came to my rescue.

“Madam, we’ve just made these prints ourselves and as for the leaves, they’ve been blown in by the wind,” she said quietly. “The room was clean before then. As a matter of fact, I helped her in the cleaning.”

Mrs. Gobede turned to Lola, hostility darkening her fleshy face. “Ah, now I know the source of her laziness—it’s your mother.”

Lola knitted her brows. “How does our mother come into this?”

“Oh, you don’t see?” the witch screeched. “A person’s actions are as a result of his or her upbringing. Someone brought up in a pigsty can’t see any filth here. And since both of you cannot see the dirt then I can safely assume that you were brought up in a dump!”

“Mrs. Gobede, our mother keeps her hut much cleaner than this house, doing all the cleaning and household chores by herself” Lola pointed out. “All you know is to scream Rhoda do this, Rhoda do that; between you two, who’s lazy?”

“You dare ask me that question?” Mrs. Gobede asked.

“I’ll dare you whatever I like,” Lola retorted. “And who do you think you are? If Mr. Gobede hadn’t made the mistake of marrying you, you’d just be a nobody selling some

badly distilled spirits in your home village.”

The challenge unsettled Mrs. Gobede. I moved in quickly to diffuse the situation. “Forgive my sister, madam,” I said. “We’ll clean the room.”

Mrs. Gobede’s mouth moved but no words came out. She stormed out of the lounge without another word. A few moments later, we heard her drive away.

“A sailor’s wife had chestnuts in her lap and munched and munched and munched-” Lola quoted the First Witch in the Tragedy of Macbeth as the sound of Mrs. Gobede’s car faded away.

“Give me some-” I said.

“Aroint thee, witch!” finished Lola, waving her hands as if shooing away Mrs. Gobede.

We both laughed at this parallel of the witches and Mrs. Gobede.

“Rhoda, you should stop working here,” Lola declared.

“I wish I could but you know I need the money to support mum,” I said.

“I know but you shouldn’t let Hecate get away with everything,” she said. “You should teach her to respect you. If not as a human being, then as a worker. In any case she’s a savage who’s just lucky that is she married to a well to do husband!”

Lola’s words brought a sudden idea into my mind. She was right. Mrs. Gobede needed to be taught a lesson. Already, I had a faint idea of what my revenge would be like. I did not voice my mind to Lola. All I said was, “Don’t worry, sister, my time will come.”

In spite of my entreaties, Lola refused to spend the night under what she said was the roof of a sorceress. She left in the afternoon. Mrs. Gobede returned in the evening and said nothing about the morning incident.

The next day, as I cleaned the house, my plan for revenge began to take some form. By that afternoon, my plot had taken a definite shape and my spirits soared. I was whistling as I washed the clothes, singing as I hung the clothes on the clothes line and humming as I swept the yard. Even Mrs. Gobede noted that I was brewing something for she gave me suspicious glances every time we crossed paths.

This became my new habit. Whenever she called me to do something I answered with a spirited ‘yes madam’ and worked on the task in a very positive manner.

I knew Mrs. Gobede wanted to ask me the reason for my new-found happiness but her pride could not bring her to do so. All she could do was steal apprehensive glimpses at me like a dog who has not yet established the basis of his suspicion.

Had she known what was in my mind, she would have fired me there and then. But the mind is a sacred place, only accessible to the individual. What she did not know was that I had made up my mind that I was going to steal her husband.

You see, I had realized that her license to abuse me stemmed from the fact that she was Mr. Gobede’s wife. Without being married to him she was nothing. I had in fact gone far with education than her; I had attempted Form Four while she had dropped out in Standard Eight. Yet she strutted up and down the house giving orders like some medieval queen forgetting all that. I intended to pull down the ladder she was on and enjoy watching her topple to the ground where she belonged.

I felt no remorse in this scheme. As far as I was concerned she had brought this upon

herself. My grandmother always said that whoever married lightning should not fear its flash. So Mrs. Gobede was going to be badly burnt by the lightning.

Mr. Gobede returned late at night five days later. As was always the case when he came back home late, I was the one who opened the door for him and served him his dinner while Mrs. Gobede had already gone to sleep. At such times I was required to go to bed only after I had removed and washed the plates. Before I had thought of my retaliation, I would wait in the kitchen until he finished eating then go and remove the plates after he had retired to bed.

But that night, I pretended to have forgotten the table salt and brought it while he was eating. I also brought the fruits he liked to eat after each meal while he was still eating, all that time sending him stolen glances. When he was retiring to bed, I was satisfied that I had awakened enough interest in him.

I knew it was not going to be easy to seduce Mr. Gobede. Snatching someone's husband is not an easy thing. It is a messy business. And my task was made even more difficult by the fact that he was a church elder and a family man of very strong morals.

But I considered this not as an impossibility but rather as an obstacle to be overcome. A friend of mine had once told me that a woman could get any man she wanted as long as she played the game right and used any means necessary.

Working in a religious household, I planned to use lessons on husband snatching that I had gleaned from the bible to achieve my goal. Ruth used her feminine wiles to get Boaz. Bathsheba used her nakedness to force the anointed of God, King David, into making her his wife. In my case I planned to copy Ester. Did that orphan girl not grab Ahasuerus from the vain queen Vashti by beguiling the great Persian King with her charms? It was now up to me, Rhoda the housemaid, to find what charms I could use to woo the church elder Gobede.

From that day on, I wasted no opportunity to inveigle Mr. Gobede. Whenever I set my eyes on him I always made sure I seized his attention by glancing at him in a way that told him I desired him. When he was talking to me I would bite my fingertips coquettishly while looking at him from under my eyelashes.

Now and then I would deliberately spill something when he was alone in the sitting room watching TV or reading a newspaper. Cleaning the floor cannot be done without bending one's back. So I would do the cleaning while giving him an eyeful of my thighs by pretending that I was not aware that my skirt had gone up. Sometimes I would let my blouse slide up so that he could see the colourful beads around my waist. Occasionally when giving him something, I would almost throw my chest in his face so that he could get a good peek at my ample breasts.

Oh, let me remind you that the fact that one is a housemaid does not mean she is not endowed with the assets that men crave for. On my part I was a knockout, with a body that would make any normal man salivate with desire. When I smiled, dimples dug valleys in my cheeks. My breasts were big, my waist narrow and my hips broad. Above all I had the ultimate weapon that African men find irresistible; a buxom behind. When I was walking, I could shake my buttocks in a way that I imagined they were saying,

'Mr. Gobede I love you, Mr. Gobede I love you.' I displayed these wares fully for the benefit of Mr. Gobede but very carefully to prevent him from noticing that I was doing it deliberately.

It was not long that Mr. Gobede began to notice me as a woman and not just as a house maid. I would on occasion catch him stealing gamboled glances at me which I would encourage by acknowledging with a secret smile. Whenever I stole a glance at him, he would do the same. We found that without saying anything, we were communicating something to each other.

The high and mighty Mrs. Gobede, blinded by her hatred of me, failed to see all this. She became more and more obnoxious when she noted that her abuse was not having any effect on me. She did not know that this was part of my plot to destroy her.

She started becoming less careful, maltreating me even when Mr. Gobede was there. I would goad her on by lots of hearty 'yes madam' and 'anything else I can do, madam?' At such times she would try to find faults with whatever I was doing and use uncouth language which her husband found repugnant. I soon found Mr. Gobede coming to my defense.

At first Mrs. Gobede gave up without a fight. But the more Mr. Gobede defended me, the more she started to lose her temper. And I also started to make sure that she noticed Mr. Gobede's interest in me. I knew that would drive her crazy.

Their first big crash came one pleasant Saturday afternoon. I was in the kitchen lazily washing the plates while watching the butterflies playing among the flowers outside as the sun played peek-a-boo with tufts of clouds in the sky. A bird was singing in the tree close to the window. Mr. and Mrs. Gobede were sitting in the lounge having a bible study.

"Rhoda, bring me some water!" Mrs. Gobede's voice rang from the living room.

I calculatingly delayed, knowing it would raise her temper.

"What is this lazy girl doing?" I heard her complain to Mr. Gobede, then she called again, her voice a note higher. "Rhoda, I said bring me a glass of water or are you trying to kill me with thirst, wicked girl?"

"I'm coming, madam," I answered in a sing song voice, banging pots.

"Stupid girl, I said bring me water!" Mrs. Gobede screamed angrily.

I rushed into the sitting room and deliberately slipped as I neared Mrs. Gobede. The water tipped out into her lap.

"I'm sorry, madam," I stammered. "I..."

She slapped me once. Then again. The third time, Mr. Gobede caught her hand.

"What're you doing?" he fumed. "Can't you see it was an accident?"

But Hecate was on the warpath. She broke free and kicked at me with her feet. I did not resist, only protected my head with my hands.

Mr. Gobede got hold of her and pushed her away from me. "What's wrong with you? What wrong has she done?"

"Are you backing that lazy thing?"

I saw anger flash in Mr. Gobede's eyes. "I'll not have anyone speak like that to a

human being in this house.”

“I’ll speak to her in any way I want,” Mrs. Gobede shot back.

“As Christians we’re supposed to treat everyone with respect and dignity,” Mr. Gobede said. “Isn’t that what we were discussing just moments ago? Isn’t that what the bible tells us?”

Mrs. Gobede should have remained quiet. But anger had taken the better part of her. “To hell with the bible,” she shrieked. “That miserable creature must learn her place in this house.”

I saw a shocked look on Mr. Gobede’s face. There and then I knew Mrs. Gobede had crossed the thin red line. People do not know, but religious people are sometimes the cruelest people in the world. They can commit and justify the worst atrocities in the name of God. I knew Mr. Gobede was such a person.

“My point is that as Christians we must live by example,” Mr. Gobede explained in a tight voice.

“We must live by example, my ass...”

Mr. Gobede cut her. “Shut up! I said I’ll not have such language used in this house.”

Mrs. Gobede let out an impertinent laugh. “We must live by example!” she repeated sarcastically while clapping her hands insolently. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed the dirty looks you throw at this bitch, hypocrite!”

Mr. Gobede was calm. But his handsome face was terrible to look at. “You’re calling me, Joseph Gobede, church elder, a hypocrite?”

“Yes, I’m calling you a charlatan and adulterer! I know you’re hankering after this garbage and that’s why you’re always defending her.”

“You dare accuse me of being a charlatan? An adulterer?”

“Yes, you’re an impostor and a philanderer,” Mrs. Gobede said defiantly.

With that, I knew she had sealed her own doom. Although Mr. Gobede was interested in me, he would not have taken any action as long as it was against his religious beliefs. He could admire me but he was beyond adultery. For my plan to work, he needed to convince himself that he had married a woman who would lead him to the very pits of hell. Their arguments were inexorably heading in that direction.

For Mr. Gobede, who prided himself as the most devout Christian in his church, to be called a hypocrite by his own wife was beyond belief. And for her to insinuate that he was coveting the maid was beyond redemption.

“I thought you were a pious woman,” he said in a voice coated with steel. “But I was wrong. You’re a wolf in a sheepskin.”

He bent down and touched me on the shoulder. “Go to your room, Rhoda.”

I rose and saw the look of fear on Mrs. Gobede. I said nothing. My plot was now on its way in earnest. Hecate was going to be burned on the stakes.

From that day on, there was no peace in the house. The Gobedes would quarrel almost on everything. Mr. Gobede moved out of their matrimonial bedroom and slept in the spare bedroom. They no longer talked to each other. Pretending to be an innocent bystander, I continued to take care of all household chores with outstanding efficiency.

Mrs. Gobede complained to the Church Council. Marriage counsellors from the church came to discuss the matter. I hid in the corridor to eavesdrop on the discussions.

“We’ve become total strangers in this house,” I heard Mrs. Gobede carp.

Then came Mr. Gobede’s voice. “Of course, we’re total strangers. I thought I knew her. This woman is evil, more wicked than Jezebel and I wouldn’t have such a woman as my wife.”

“But the Bible gives adultery as the only ground for divorce...” an elder chipped in.

“The same bible tells us that if your eye makes you sin, remove it,” Mr. Gobede said calmly. “I’ve realized that if I continue staying with my wife I’ll live in sin, so like the eye, I’m removing her.”

“Elder Gobede...”

“Elder Phulani,” Mr. Gobede cut him. “The bible is full examples of great men who fell because of sticking to the wrong women. Samson and Ahab are excellent examples.”

There was silence, then the arguments resumed. I decided to stoke up the fire a little bit more. So, I took a jug of juice and some tumblers on a tray and slid into the sitting room. I slowly set them on the table. I gyrated my hips provocatively as I left the room, aware that only Mrs. Gobede’s eyes were following me.

At the door, I turned, pursed my lips, pointed my finger threateningly at her and then made the sign of cutting the throat with my fingers and whispered, “Aroint thee, witch.”

I knew the sign was infuriating to the woman. “And another thing,” Mrs. Gobede howled, getting to her feet and pointing at me. “I think he’s fucking that bitch!” she shouted and broke into a catalogue of vile curses so obscene that even the devil would have been ashamed.

There was shocked silence in the room. “See what I meant?” Mr. Gobede said. “These’re the true colours of the woman I married. I’d rather enter the kingdom of God a bachelor than go to hell just to save a marriage.”

They separated the following day and divorced a year later. I am now Mrs. Gobede. I heard that the first Mrs. Gobede, formerly my employer and whom I secretly called Hecate, now sells vegetables in her home village. Both her loathsome children dropped out of school. The son is serving a jail sentence for petty robbery while the daughter sells her body in drinking joints in Blantyre.



The Dark Side of Progress

All his life Sulani had believed that the village's outdated traditions had no place in the modern world. Therefore he had dedicated his life to fighting what he saw as harmful traditions that held the village's progress hostage. However, when he was dying, he had not been so sure. He died not of age but of heartbreak at the age of fifty. Those that visited him at his death bed saw a mad man mumbling incoherently about the unfairness of life.

When he died, a grand funeral ceremony was organized for him. Even old men agreed that in living memory they had never seen such a large number of people gather at a funeral as had gathered at Sulani's funeral ceremony. They came from all over the country, sons and daughters of the village accompanied by their friends in expensive cars to pay last respects to a man whose efforts had opened the doors of world to them.

At the funeral people discussed in small groups as to what had led to Sulani's untimely demise. Was it because of what his son had done? Or had the change been so sudden? But if that was the case, how had hardliners like Thubwa Lubwa survived the jolt?

Nobody gave a clear answer. You should note that Yemba had not always been the progressive village that it was now with modern houses and even cars. When Sulani was settling in the village, Yemba had been a collection of mud huts with villagers who prided themselves of being the last custodians of Chewa culture.

While all the other surrounding villages had in one way or the other diluted the influence of their customs and traditions, Yemba held steadfast to them the way a man swept by an angry river clings to a floating log.

One would think the village was tucked in the middle of nowhere. Otherwise in this age how would you explain a village which had, for instance, no latrines and its inhabitants refused to send its children to school? During the rainy season, the villagers kept themselves busy cultivating in the maize fields only to harvest even less than enough to feed themselves because they refused to use fertilizers and modern maize varieties.

Come the dry season, the village became lively. The big graveyard at the edge of the village turned into a hive of activity. Boys were sent to a secluded part of the graveyard called dambwe to be taught the traditions and customs of their fathers. At the end of the initiation ceremony, masked dancers called nyau escorted the boys back to their parents in a colourful ceremony. As for girls, they went to a place by the river called simba where they were taught how to behave as responsible women in society.

Yet Yemba village was less than thirty kilometres from Lilongwe, Malawi's bustling capital city. In this village, where people thought the best they could do for their children was to send them either to the dambwe or simbas to be initiated, Sulani was the only person who thought so little of the customs and traditions. With modernization, he thought most traditions and customs had been eroded to relics.

But this is where he was grossly wrong. Most people in the village valued their traditions. And nobody valued the customs more than Thubwa Lubwa, his brother-

in-law.

You see, Sulani came from Mbalame, a more progressive village just across the river. He had moved into the village following his wife because Chewa custom required that the husband live in the wife's village. This was so because among the Chewa, the children belonged to their mother. The mother's brother, the uncle, was the head of the clan and had the right to decide how his nephews and nieces were to be brought up. The role of the father was that of impregnating the mother like a bull.

Sulani knew this very well when he was marrying Nankhoma. After all he was also a Chewa. "It is as if the people in that village are still living in the dark ages," his friend Shumba had cautioned him. "Imagine they still go and relieve themselves in the bush," he had paused and glanced at Sulani. Everything about his tall, well-built friend spoke of money, from Sulani's pure white shirt, well ironed expensive trousers to his shiny leather shoes. "You're a modern, well-to-do young man, how will you live among such people?"

However, as you know, when the heart is aflame with love, one does not listen to reason. So there was no way anything was going to stop young Sulani from marrying the short girl with a curvaceous figure who had stolen his heart at the chimtali dance. "I'll cure them of that," Sulani had replied carelessly. "Man, this is the modern world. When I settle in that village I'll show them, by examples, the benefits of abandoning their useless traditions."

But when he married Nankhoma and settled in the village, he found the villagers so entrenched in their ways of life. And this was complicated by the fact that nobody clung more to their traditions than Thubwa Lubwa, his brother-in-law.

Approaching thirty, Thubwa Lubwa was very short and skeletally thin. He had a gaunt face and a bushy beard. He was usually dressed in brown frayed jacket and black bell bottom trousers that hid sandals made of tyre soles. This brother-in-law of his was not only an elder at the *dambwe* but also prided himself with carrying the label of the most drunken never-do-well man in the village.

He was talkative and always spoke bluntly, calling it being open with you. And this drunk let no opportunity pass to remind any man who had the misfortune to marry one of his sisters that he was the uncle and their children would be raised the way he thought fit. And unfortunately, he had only one sister and so it meant it was only Sulani who would have to keep up with his obnoxious behavior.

Their dislike was mutual. Sulani did not like the way Thubwa Lubwa hated anything foreign and stuck to their customs like a bird gummed on glue. On the other hand, Thubwa Lubwa did not trust his brother in law because he did not hold with their traditional values and customs. They seemed to clash almost on anything.

The two men tolerated each other the way a dog and a cat living in the same house does. Sulani put up with Thubwa Lubwa's deplorable behavior because he was his wife's brother and there was nothing he could do to change that. In the case of Thubwa Lubwa, it was because he lived off Sulani's riches like a tick. If Sulani had been poor, he would have moved heaven and earth to end the marriage.

Normally an uncle was expected to be involved in the raising of his nephews or nieces only after they were born. But Thubwa Lubwa insisted that raising a child started from the day the child was conceived. So, the moment Sulani's wife became pregnant, Thubwa Lubwa took it into his head that his role of looking after his nephew had started.

From that day on, every day he would show up at Sulani's house saying he was coming to see how his nephew was faring. And all that time he would ask for money from Sulani justifying this by saying he was failing to work because he was taking care of Sulani's wife and his nephew. He even identified a traditional birth attendant to assist during the baby's delivery.

But Sulani had no plans of allowing his wife deliver at a traditional birth attendant's. For one thing, these women were not qualified midwives and for the other the mother delivered in a very unhealthy environment.

So when the day of Nankhoma's delivery drew near, he secretly made arrangements to have the baby delivered at the district hospital. Sulani did not know how Thubwa Lubwa got wind of the arrangement but he suspected he must have got it from Nankhoma's mother who was staying with them at that time.

It was a typical October afternoon. The sky was crystal blue and the sun was blazing hot. When a breeze came, it was like a breath from a kiln. Sulani sat in an arm chair in the shade of the verandah of his big square baked brick house reading a book. A glass of cold water stood on a stool beside him.

Thubwa Lubwa, drenched in sweat, arrived like someone being chased by an angry dog. He scaled the steps leading to the verandah in short quick strides and grabbed Sulani by the collar of his shirt, his other hand holding a bottle of locally brewed spirits called kachasu.

"Have I heard correctly that you want my sister to deliver my nephew in a hospital?" the little man barked, yanking his brother-in-law out of his seat.

"Shouldn't we discuss that in the house?" Sulani asked politely, carefully disengaging himself from Thubwa Lubwa's grip and sinking back into his chair.

"I'm not on a social call but on a fact-finding mission," Thubwa Lubwa snarled, banging his fist so hard on the stool beside Sulani that the glass of water fell and shattered into pieces on the floor. "We will discuss this matter where I want and that place is right here."

A gust of wind blew showering them with dust. Sulani took a deep breath and stared at the clear blue sky then back at the small man standing before him in a bossing attitude. Why must his brother-in-law always spoil things? He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

The gesture was not lost on Thubwa Lubwa. "Of course, I'll suit myself," he said with marked insolence, a fist on his hip. "Now answer my question."

"Yes, it's true," Sulani replied in a matter of fact way. "I want my child to be born in the best hospital around."

Thubwa Lubwa raised a bony hand. "I didn't ask you to explain. You know I've

already made arrangements with a traditional birth attendant who will help my sister deliver. Where did you get the authority to change my instructions without my consent?”

Sulani smiled. He could break the small man like a twig with a snap of his fingers. But instead- “Well, I thought this was in the best interests of both the mother and the baby...”

“Best interests of the mother and the baby!” Thubwa Lubwa snarled, glaring down at Sulani who remained seated. “You think what I’d arranged wasn’t in their best interests?”

“I didn’t say that,” Sulani said, doing all his best to speak quietly. “But you know the risk of the mother or the child dying is higher when a woman delivers at a traditional birth attendant. Have you forgotten you lost three children at child birth?”

Thubwa Lubwa leaned forward so that his face was almost touching Sulani’s. His little eyes gleamed with fury. “Are you trying to say it was the birth attendant’s fault that the children died at birth?”

“That’s the way I see it.”

“Oh? If it was the birth attendant’s fault, why didn’t she kill the other five?”

The big man exhaled wearily getting out the arm chair. He stretched his arms, and then started moving towards the door.

“Are you walking out on me?” Thubwa Lubwa asked grimly, jutting his chin. “Anyway, as usual, it’s useless to argue with you. But my sister will deliver at a traditional birth attendant’s whether you like it or not.”

Sulani knew there was nothing to be gained by trying to argue with his despicable brother-in-law. The diminutive man could talk and talk. He decided to talk the language Thubwa Lubwa easily understood. He stopped at the door. “What is there to talk about? Your sister is my wife and I as her husband have decided that she will deliver at the hospital. Period.”

The small man laughed maliciously. “I don’t need to remind you that you married a Chewa woman. And among us Chewas...”

“Cut the uncle looks after the children of his sister crap,” Sulani said walking into the house leaving Thubwa Lubwa shaking with frustrated rage.

Two weeks later Sulani was told that he had been blessed with a bouncy baby boy. Sulani and Thubwa Lubwa went to the hospital together in a hired vehicle to see the baby. Thubwa Lubwa was beside himself with joy.

“You were right, brother-in-law, to have my sister deliver in the hospital,” he said admiring the boy. “It’s not that those traditional birth attendants couldn’t do it properly but this place looks good. He looks like a fighter; I’ll name him Nkhunzi-an ox!”

Nkhunzi immediately became Thubwa Lubwa’s favourite. He was everything an uncle could wish for- handsome and vigorous. He could envision him herding a large herd of cattle and women chasing after him. In the afternoons when he sat under the shade of a tree drinking beer, the boy would often sit with him listening to his stories.

He told him of the great Ngoni warrior chief, Zongendaba, of Kalonga, the great chief who lead the Chewa people from Congo, of Makewana, the goddess and even of Mbona, the rainmaker priest who was murdered out of jealousy by Mlauli at Khuluvi.

“I want you to grow in the ways and customs of our forefathers,” he would often tell Nkhunzi. “You must not be contaminated by foreign customs.”

Therefore, when Nkhunzi reached ten, you could imagine Thubwa Lubwa’s anger when he heard that Sulani had sent the boy to start school. Thubwa Lubwa was at Phirilanjuzi village supervising an initiation ceremony when the unwelcome news reached him.

Shocked, he excused himself and rushed back to the village. Arriving at Sulani’s house, a panga knife in his hands and murder in his eyes, he found his sister on the verandah shelling groundnuts.

“Where is that stupid person you call a husband?” he asked, slashing the air with the machete.

Nankhoma had never his brother angry like that. Thubwa Lubwa had tied the upper part of his overall around his waist and his whole body was shaking. “What is it, brother?” she asked blocking the door.

“Stay out of this, woman,” he said, pushing her away violently. “You know people kill each other for stupid reasons but this is a good one for me to kill him.”

Nankhoma followed him inside the house and fell on her knees between him and her husband. “Brother, this is not the right way of discussing an issue.”

“I’m not here for discussions. I want to deal with this piece of trash. I want to cut off his tongue and see if he’ll still mislead my nephew without it. This machete will teach him who the head of this clan is.”

Sulani stood up. The panga knife did not frighten him. He knew he could beat Thubwa Lubwa to pulp in any fight. But there was a look of madness in Thubwa Lubwa’s eyes that worried him. “Brother-in-law, please let’s discuss this matter amicably.”

“I want you to answer this question before I cut off your forked tongue. Is this I hear that you’ve sent my nephew to start school true?” Thubwa Lubwa howled.

“Yes, it’s true,” Sulani replied in a matter of fact way. “I want my child to be educated.”

Thubwa Lubwa raised a bony hand. “Your child! And whose nephew is your child?”

“Your nephew,” Sulani replied.

“And where did you get the authority to decide to send my nephew to school without consulting me?” Sulani asked.

“I meant to tell you but you’ve been away for the past two weeks attending the initiation ceremony at Phirilanjuzi. I couldn’t wait as schools had already opened.”

“Shut up that big thing you call a mouth!” Thubwa Lubwa shouted punching the palm of his left hand with his right fist. “Your very breath makes me as sick as all the foreign values you advocate. You’ll corrupt my nephew. When this boy finishes school, you won’t even recognize him.”

Sulani suppressed a laugh. “I think that’s an exaggeration. We’ve some educated people working as teachers, doctors, nurses; they are doing a lot of good to the society.”

“What good? What can a teacher teach that we couldn’t teach our children? How did we cure our diseases before your so-called doctors came? You send a child to school and everything traditional becomes irrelevant to him. Stop the child from going to school.”

“I’m sorry I’ll have to disagree with you on that...”

Thubwa Lubwa bared his teeth in the fashion of an angry wild beast. “Let me be open with you, Mr. Sulani. You married a Chewa woman and among us Chewas...”

...the uncle looks after the children of his sister,” Sulani interpolated sarcastically.

“Exactly. Your wife happens to be my sister. And I, Thubwa Lubwa Phiri,” he paused and pointed at his chest, “happen to be the uncle of your child. You’ve no role in the upbringing of the child.”

Sulani shook his head. “There’s no way I can accept that.”

The small man laughed maliciously. “You don’t have to like it but that’s the way it is. You’re like a bull. The bull does not take part in raising of the calves, does it?”

“Well, whatever you say, my son will be raised the way I see fit,” Sulani said doggedly.

Thubwa Lubwa leaned forward so that his face was almost touching Sulani’s and burped. His little eyes gleamed with fury. “Are you challenging my authority?” he asked tapping Sulani on the chest with a dirty finger.

Sulani dropped back in the chair, as if to get away from the little man’s beer reeking breath. “No, I’m not. But for me the world is changing and one must move with the changes or the changes will trample one into oblivion. Anyway, as I’ve said I reject traditional customs I consider harmful. I know you’ve the best interests of the boy at heart but in this case they’re misplaced.”

Thubwa Lubwa’s smile, which revealed a row of yellow teeth, was ghastly. It was like watching a skull smile. “You scare me in-law. You talk like a reasonable man but your actions betray you. If you say you value some of our traditions equally as foreign ones, why have you decided to send Nkhunzi to school before having him initiated at the dambwe?”

“Well, to be open with you, as you always say, school is more important than the dambwe and that’s why I’ve sent him to school. If he’s to participate in traditional ceremonies, it’ll only be during school holidays. There’s no one who can change that decision,” Sulani said with a challenging inflection.

“See how blind you are? In the past an uncle’s decision over his nephews would be final but now you’re challenging me.”

“No, I’m not...”

“Yes, you’re. Do you know what that means?”

Sulani did not answer.

“That an uncle’s role is now obsolete. And in a system, when one thing becomes obsolete then almost everything follows suit since all parts are linked in one way or the other.”

“That’s not true. I strongly believe that we must choose good western values and mix them with good traditional ones.”

Thubwa Lubwa laughed. It was like the laugh one makes when one says something incredibly stupid. “I’ve been telling you all these years that doing so is not possible. How do you determine that this custom is good and that one bad?”

Sulani had no ready answer for that.

Thubwa Lubwa eyed his in-law with eyes full of pity. “Sending him both to dambwe and school will only confuse him. Send him to school only. My only I hope is you won’t regret this decision.”

“I’m convinced it’s in the best interests of everyone. As I’ve said, he’ll participate in all traditional ceremonies during holidays. Don’t you want us to produce a doctor?”

“To me a witch doctor would suffice,” Thubwa Lubwa said with a laugh but there was no humour in his voice. Without another word, he spat on the floor and walked out of the house.

So Nkhunzi started school. The sight of the young boy going to school in a neat uniform sent the other parents thinking. Not wishing to be outdone, they also started sending their children to school. In no time, most of the children of school going age were going to school. When those children came back to school, they refused to go into the bush to relieve themselves saying their teachers said it was unhealthy. So, their parents were forced to construct toilets.

Still, behind Sulani’s back, Thubwa Lubwa tried all he could do to dissuade Nkhunzi from continuing schooling. But it was all in vain for when they sat down in the moonlight outside Thubwa Lubwa’s mud house roasting grains of dry maize, all the boy could talk of dreamily was of becoming a doctor and living in town. And when he reached secondary school and went to a boarding school in the city, and came back during school holidays, he would still find time to chat with Thubwa Lubwa under a tree as his uncle drank beer as they had done when he was still a young boy but only to talk of the wonders of the city.

Regardless of their differences, Thubwa Lubwa remained fond of his nephew. In any case, tradition did not permit him to abandon even a wayward nephew. It was his duty. If he did not bring the boy back to the right path, his ancestors would punish him. So, all he could do was hope that his nephew would outgrow his fancies.

That was why he was totally unprepared for the news Nkhunzi told him after he finished school. Nkhunzi found him sitting under a mango tree in the morning nursing a hangover. Thubwa Lubwa was pleasantly surprised to see that he had brought him a bottle of kachasu. Nkhunzi always discouraged him from drinking locally distilled spirits.

“Uncle, I’ve good news,” Nkhunzi said sinking beside him.

Thubwa Lubwa glanced proudly at his nephew. Now twenty-five, he had grown into a tall handsome boy. All the girls in the village were chasing after him. It was a pity the boy was showing no interest in any of the girls. Most of the boys of his age were already married. He hoped the good news his nephew had was to tell him he had found a girl friend.

He took a long pull at his kachasu, grimaced then sighed with satisfaction. “It must

really be good news otherwise I wouldn't be holding this bottle of delicious kachasu in my hands."

Nkhunzi brought his mouth close to his uncle's ear and whispered, "My father has agreed to send me to England to continue schooling."

Thubwa Lubwa almost choked on the drink. His mouth dropped open with surprise. But Nkhunzi was too pleased to notice.

"You know what that means? When I come back I'll get a very good job. I'll build you a nice house and you'll stop drinking this beer and drink something nice," he said slapping Thubwa Lubwa lightly and fondly on the shoulder.

"Why should you go abroad?" Thubwa Lubwa croaked when he had found his voice. "I thought they've offered you a good job at the tobacco estate?"

Nkhunzi laughed contemptuously. "A good job? Even if it was a good job, I wouldn't want to work at an estate in a crummy village like this."

A breeze blew, bringing a wonderful smell of flowers. Thubwa Lubwa gazed at the huts peppering the village, the goats resting in the verandahs, the chicken scabbling for food and listened to the mooing of cows grazing along the river and felt proud. What else would one need in a village? "You have grown up here..."

"What is here?" Nkhunzi said with a sweep of his hands while looking around with distaste. "A cluster of grass thatched mud huts making a village. A few small dilapidated shops making a trading centre there. Maize fields everywhere. Men lazing in the shades of verandahs or trees the way we are doing now. Women gossiping in groups. Kids playing in the dust in the scorching sun. Jesus, this is suffocating!"

"You could study at the university in Zomba," Thubwa Lubwa suggested weakly.

Nkhunzi laughed. "Uncle, when one gets qualifications from overseas he is respected more than one who gets the same qualifications here. You know education standards are far much higher in England than here."

"That's what I don't like, this demeaning of everything local," Thubwa Lubwa growled. "I'll not be surprised when you come back with a bleached skin looking like some overripe tomato."

"That's your problem, uncle. You always look at the dark side of things. When I'm in the UK you'll know you've a nephew!"

Soon the news spread throughout the whole village that Nkhunzi was going abroad. Everyone came to congratulate him and tell him to send them something when he was in England.

The day he left, the whole village came to see him off at the bus stage. The bus arrived and they escorted him to the bus' door like a popular politician leaving a rally. It was a great day for the village: their son was going overseas.

When he arrived in England he wrote to his parents and uncle that he had travelled well. And it appeared it was in England where he finally discovered his roots. Most of the letters he wrote were to his uncle only. In those letters, he would tell him about life in England. What Thubwa Lubwa noted was that in most of the letters his nephew would complain that life was not as easy as he had thought.

He would take such letters to Sulani and give him to read with what did I tell you look. But all that changed suddenly when he wrote to say he had found a rich marriage partner. He started sending a lot of money to Thubwa Lubwa. In no time, Thubwa Lubwa had built a good house and a grocery. The money blinded him and he forgot all his resistance to Nkhunzi's stay in England.

But as they say a storm comes after a calm. Thubwa Lubwa bought a maize mill. Coincidentally, two boys died the same day the maize mill started operating. The boys' parents suspected foul play and complained to the village headman. The headman immediately called in a witch doctor.

The witchdoctor arrived, an emaciated small old man with horribly crossed eyes. His shaved head, stuck full of coloured chicken feathers, looked like a decorated skull. He was completely naked save for a dirty hyena skin around his loins. Clutched in his claws, were a black horn and a whisk. He had in his company a young man who carried magic gourds, roots, bones and some things very difficult to describe.

The village headman invited everyone to the village square where the witch doctor was expected to identify the witch.

"We've among us a witch who has killed two of our children with magic," the village headman said when the whole village was assembled. "I've invited Mukhuba to flush out the witch."

The witch doctor referred to as Mukhuba began his work. He began chanting while dancing round a big magic gourd. As he danced, the young man kept throwing bones in the air. Then the witch doctor squatted in front of the enormous magic gourd and gazed into it.

A smile spread on his gaunt face. "There they are," he said looking into a magic gourd. "They're working, pulling a belt in a maize mill."

The village square was completely filled that it was impossible to move. But if one noted the direction heads turned, one would have noted that it was in the direction where Thubwa Lubwa sat among the village elders. He was the only man with a maize mill in the village.

The witch doctor continued. "The one who has killed the children has very powerful magic charms that I'm failing to see him. But he has just opened a maize mill. Lead me to a maize mill that has just been opened."

The village headman led the way to Thubwa Lubwa's maize mill. There, Mukhuba danced several times around the building housing the maize mill. Then he told everyone to be very quiet.

"You should listen when they switch off the maize mill. You'll hear the boys crying that they're tired."

An order was given and the maize mill was switched off. The maize mill made the usual sound a diesel propelled engine makes when switching off. In the tense atmosphere and exhorted by the witch-doctor people screamed they indeed heard the boys crying.

Then the situation descended into anarchy. People pulled down the building and

set the maize mill on fire. Then the crowd went to Thubwa Lubwa's shop and looted it. They would have pulled down his house as well had Sulani not appealed to the village elders not to let such a thing happen.

"You're banished from this village for being a witch," the village headman declared.

Thubwa Lubwa was aghast. "How can you do this without giving me a chance to explain? This is all a mistake. I've been set up by some jealous people."

"What is there to explain? There're a lot of people in this village, why didn't the jealous people you're talking about set them up?" asked the village headman. "If a goat is eaten and you see a hyena passing by do you have to ask who has eaten the goat? In any case I was suspicious the way you had got rich so quickly, a drunk like you."

Thubwa Lubwa took in the tattered black great coat the village headman was wearing, the old man's bare feet and then the wicked grin on the short, wiry man's face. The man seemed intent on punishing him because he was rich and he was poor. "But you know the money was sent to me by my nephew in England. I told you several times!"

"Did you give me even a coin to prove that he really sent you money? What I believe is he just sent you a little money and you multiplied it magically," the village headman said with devilish glee. "Where could Nkhunzi get all the money that you claim he has been sending you?"

"I told you he found a rich girlfriend..."

But the village headman was walking away showing that the discussion was over. "You've until sunset to leave this village," he stopped and glanced back at Thubwa Lubwa. "After that we'll chase you out like a mad dog."

Thubwa Lubwa left to live with his grandmother in his father's village. Destitute, he wrote to his nephew explaining what had happened. Nkhunzi said he was coming to sort out the matter. "I will explain to them I was the one who sent you the money. The witch doctor will be exposed as a fraud and you will regain your rightful place in the village. I will also take the opportunity to bring my partner so that we should hold a traditional engagement ceremony."

News of Nkhunzi's home coming found its way to Yemba village and spread throughout the village like a bush fire. In a sudden twist, the village elders convened an emergency meeting and resolved that Thubwa Lubwa must be allowed to return to the village.

"The witch doctor fooled us," the village chief said to Thubwa Lubwa. "In any case there is no way we can allow our great son to return to the village only to find that we had banished his favourite uncle. And when he comes, tell him of the terrible state of my house."

So, over several bottles of kachasu, the matter was buried. Thubwa Lubwa returned to the village a hero to begin the felicitious preparations for Nkhunzi's return. There would be chintali, chioda and mganda dancers to welcome their hero.

"This is a boy after my heart," Thubwa Lubwa said proudly to Sulani. "Despite his

misguided upbringing, he remembers his roots. A traditional marriage ceremony! I never thought he would think of that.”

Sulani was excited too. He had been worried when his son had shown no interest in girls. He was growing old and he longed for a grandson. The baked brick houses peppering the village, the solar electricity panels on the roofs of houses and cars parked outside some houses were great achievements but he felt a grandson would be an even more great achievement.

The day they had all been waiting for arrived. Everyone in the village converged at Sulani’s house dressed in their best attire. Thubwa Lubwa, who had already usurped the role of Sulani, was the perfect host. He mingled with the crowd while throwing jokes here and there.

“Do you think the wife he’s bringing is beautiful?” Nankhoma asked.

“Of course she’s beautiful,” Sulani replied with a laugh. “Where could he get an ugly woman in England?”

“And if he wanted an ugly wife why marry there when there are plenty to choose from here?” Thubwa Lubwa joked.

People laughed at the comment and in that manner, time flew. Nkhunzi’s car appeared early in the afternoon. It was a large white pick-up. The body was crammed full with suitcases and cartons. Several bicycles were tied on top of the cartons. Kids ran along it.

As the car came to a halt, women ululated while men whistled. The crowd surrounded the car that it was impossible to open its doors. Thubwa Lubwa shouted at the top of his voice for people to create space so that Nkhunzi could come out. No-one paid heed. Everyone wanted to peep into the car. It was only after he had told some young men to push away the people that some space was made.

The first person to get out of the pick up was a man in a black suit. He was tall and very black in complexion. A driver, the villagers concluded. The man came around the car and opened the passenger door.

A young lady with a heavily painted face that reminded the villagers of the brightly coloured nyau dancer called namalocha, stepped out. She was in black sunglasses and a small red hat was perched on her head. Almost as tall as the man, she was in a tight-fitting blouse that showed her navel. Her mini skirt fitted her tightly like stockings.

The silence that descended on the assembled villagers was as disturbing as the silence of a tomb. People exchanged surprised glances. There was no-one else in the car. Where was Nkhunzi?

The young lady walked gracefully towards Sulani and hugged him affectionately “Father, how can you not recognize me?” she asked, pouting.

Sulani stood rigid as if frozen, his mouth open like that of a dead fish, a look of disbelief on his face.

“It’s me,” she said taking off her hat and sun glasses. In the oppressive silence, her voice rang out as clear as the crack of a whip. “Nkhunzi!”

“Nkhunzi?” his father and uncle asked in unison.

“Yes. And this is my husband Clarence,” Nkhunzi said indicating the tall man in the black suit.

Nkhunzi turned to Clarence. “Honey, meet my father and uncle...”

But there was no-one to take Clarence’s outstretched hand. Nkhunzi’s father had fainted with shock while Thubwa Lubwa watched with shocked amusement!

When Sulani recovered, he was never the same. He failed to comprehend how a child he had taken so much effort to educate could do what he did. Even when Nkhunzi explained that it was being done in Europe and other countries in Africa, his father still could not understand. The people of the village did not blame him, they simply sighed the youth of today and went about their daily business. But Sulani, the man who had opened their eyes to modernity, refused to accept this new thing until his mind gave up and he died a madman.



Dine with the Devil

Jack was so engrossed in packing that he did not notice his mother enter into the room through the open doorway. It was not until she spoke that he became aware of her presence.

“Are you sure you really want to go and live in Lilongwe?” she asked softly.

Jack looked up at her. Why could she not see the obvious? Did he have to explain that the reason he had gone to school was to find a way out of the lousy village?

But he was now getting away from it—the emptiness of village life and its lack of horizons. Year in, year out, it was all about toiling in the gardens only to produce barely enough to keep body and soul together until you got old and died. One was caught in the jaws of poverty with no hope of escape.

“Very sure, mum,” Jack replied at length. “I’m starting a new life.”

His mother eyed him with concern. “But I hear life in town is tough. Things are very expensive, people live in tiny dilapidated houses, and crime is rampant...”

Jack cut her with a wave of his hand. “You’re only looking at the dark side, mother. What about the elegant mansions? Expensive cars?”

“Well, that’s only for rich people,” she answered. “You’re not rich.”

He shook his head slowly and dug his hand into the suitcase he was packing. An envelope appeared in his hand. From the envelope he took out a certificate. Printed on it in bold letters was, ‘This is to certify that Jack Guduli has qualified for the Award of a Malawi School Certificate of Education.’

Jack smiled. The certificate was the key to a bright future. Although he had never been in the city before, he had heard that there were plenty of job opportunities if one held the right qualifications. And he held them. A Malawi School Certificate of Education with credit was not a thing to be messed with.

With the certificate he felt he could knock openings in solid concrete. Now he was in a position to achieve his wildest dreams. He could already see himself living in a mansion in town, with a good job, a luxurious car, plenty of money and every conceivable luxury in the world.

He knew it would not be easy; it would require a lot of hard work and sacrifice. But he had the required qualifications and determination to make it in the city.

“I’m not rich, mum. But this talisman shall make me rich in no time,” he said, waving the certificate at her. “In any case, Uncle Joe said he’ll find me a job.”

“But you already have got a good job here,” his mother countered.

“A good job?” Jack exclaimed. “You call working as a clerk at a tobacco estate a good job?”

“Yes, at least you get money every month end,” she paused and looked around the room. “Look, you’ve already built yourself a nice house.”

Jack laughed. Apart from the job opportunities, the city lured him with its bright lights, elegant buildings, posh cars and the unlimited entertainment. And his mother had the effrontery—excuse the word—to suggest that he continue working as a clerk at

a farm. Not him. The job was for dull people with no ambitions in life. To him the sky was the limit. There was no way he was going to rot in the boring village. The shoddy village was not for him anymore,

He stopped packing and went to the window, hands clasped behind his back. Mud houses that looked like anthills littered the landscape as far as his eyes could see. Pigs rolled in the mud outside grass fenced bathrooms. Herd boys tended cattle and goats on the river bank.

“Mother, this unbaked brick house is nothing,” he said leaving the window and resuming packing. “Just wait until I get a job in town and you’ll know what being rich means.”

“What about Nabetha?” she made a last-ditch effort. “She’ll be worried that the bad girls in town will snap you up like a tasty cookie.”

Jack knew his mother was not exaggerating. Tall, startlingly good looking and with radiating fitness, he attracted girls the way a bright flower attracts butterflies.

He shook his head. “Mum, I’ve already told you that I can’t marry her because she’s my cousin. At any rate, marriage is not on my agenda now.”

His mother shrugged. “Well, then finish packing otherwise you’ll miss your bus.”

Jack continued packing. As a matter of fact, he just packed his blanket, bed sheets and his best clothes. The clothes would only be needed until he got his first pay. After that he would buy designer clothes and shoes to fit a man of his education.

He had just finished packing when his grandmother appeared in the doorway. “I forgot something, Jack,” she said. “You’re going into a world where not everyone will wish you good.”

God! He hoped he was not going into another lengthy lecture about how bad the world was out there. He knew his grandmother. She could talk and talk. It was half seven in the morning. The bus passed through their village before eight. That meant he had better start off for the bus stage.

“Out there you’ll be like a sheep among wolves so you’ll need protection,” she broke off suddenly and unclenched her left fist to reveal a small square sewn leather bundle. “This magic charm will bring you luck as well as give you protection from your enemies.”

Jack laughed while shaking his head. “Grandma, I’m going to town to look for a job and not to make enemies.”

Her grandmother smiled to reveal toothless gums. “Well, you never know. Take it, just in case.”

He was about to refuse when he realized that doing so would only prolong the issue. He would accept the magic charm only to humour her. Once in town, he would throw it away.

“OK, I’ll take it. Just in case, as you say,” he said giving her a charming smile.

Soon he was saying goodbye to his parents, relatives and friends who came to see him off at the bus stage. Nabetha, all smiles, was there to say goodbye too. It was obvious she was in love with Jack and was optimistic she was going to live in town

once Jack married her. He had never told her of this but he was sure his mother had more than hinted at this prospect.

“Take this so that you won’t forget me,” she said shyly, slipping a folded handkerchief in his hands.

The bus arrived. Jack boarded the bus like an overconfident boxer entering a boxing arena. He waved vigorously at Nabetha as the bus moved off. She looked beautiful, dressed in a bright yellow dress, white knee length stockings and matching yellow plastic shoes. But as soon as she was out of sight when the bus rounded the first corner, he forgot all about her. Much as it was the custom in the village for cousins to marry, he was not in favour of that. He had read somewhere that in-breeding brought complication to children born to such parents.

“Lilongwe, here I come,” he shouted waving his fist victoriously.

The other passengers stared at him. But he was oblivious of their presence. He had crossed the Rubicon. He was on the march to greatness.

Had he not been so excited, he would not have missed the look on the sprucely dressed fat gentleman sitting next to him. It was a look of pity-the kind one gives to the doomed!

2

He found Uncle Joe waiting for him at Lilongwe bus depot. A tall thin man with a boyish face and a rakish moustache, he was resplendent in a black suit and matching pointed shoes. His shirt was pure white and his tie blue. A cigarette dangled from one corner of his mouth.

“Welcome to Lilongwe, village boy,” Uncle Joe said hugging him. “But don’t worry; I’ll make you a town boy in no time.”

Uncle Joe was jolly man, always laughing. He took everything casually. When he had left the village years ago vowing to strike it rich in the city, everyone had taken that as dreams of a joker. They had all said he would come back poorer than he left. But he had proved them wrong.

Nobody knew what it was he did, but it must have been important because every time he visited the village he showered his relatives with gifts like clothes and blankets. Now, if Uncle Joe who had only gone up to primary school could afford all that, what about him who had gone through the esteemed classes of a secondary school?

He was the reason why Jack had dumped the clerical job at the tobacco estate and opted to trek to town to look for a job. Like his uncle, he wanted to make it big in town.

Uncle Joe led the way out of the bus depot to a taxi rank. Dented and rusty taxis cluttered the taxi rank. Uncle Joe seemed very popular with the drivers and they treated him with respect. Jack felt proud. Uncle Joe was his idea of a man.

They took a battered white Toyota Corolla that looked better than all the other taxis. The sun, low in the west, painted the city a lovely gold. He watched the imposing

buildings disappear as kilometers slipped behind to be replaced by a jumble of descript buildings of all shapes and size. Even the sun's golden tone failed to add any beauty to the buildings. The road was now full of potholes and Jack had to cling to the seat to avoid hitting the roof as the taxi bounced him up and down in the potholes.

About 20 minutes later the taxi dropped them at some sort of a trading centre teeming with people. There were packed lines of tumble down shops on both sides of the road. Women sold vegetables on the roadsides while hawkers plied their trade in the road itself.

Then he noticed it. It was everywhere. The odour of rotting rubbish and human wastes. The air was thick with it that he felt as if he could almost touch it. Garbage was strewn everywhere. Any space in the muddle of houses served as a rubbish dump.

"Welcome to Piyasani Location," his uncle gushed. "This is your new home. How do you like it?"

God! How could his uncle think a sane person could like this? All the same-

"It's alright," he replied, avoiding disappointing his uncle. "Only that it's so different from..." he wanted to say from what he had expected but instead said, "from the village. I guess I'll like it here."

"Boy, here in the location is where life is," Uncle Joe continued to enthuse. "Life in the suburbs is dull, just like in the villages. Don't be fooled by the imposing mansions. The locations, that's where the people are. And where the people are that's where life is. Welcome, nephew, you'll enjoy it."

Enjoy living in the pigsty? Jack wanted to ask. Maybe, if you call wallowing in the mud enjoyment. In any case living in a pigsty had never been part of his plans.

"Now it's time you saw my humble abode!" Uncle Joe said snapping his fingers.

Jack was surprised to see a young man materialize from nowhere and pick his luggage. Jack felt proud. His uncle was obviously an important man to command such respect in the city. He could already see the advantages of being a nephew to such an important man.

There was no road, only gaps between the crumbling houses. The houses faced different directions. What was one's front yard was equally someone's backyard. Jack saw a girl scatter garbage where an elderly woman had just finished sweeping. Obscene graffiti covered most walls. Tall grass grew in between the buildings. Pools of water from bathrooms were everywhere. A young lady was answering the call of nature in a toilet that could not entirely conceal her.

They came across a big dilapidated house set in a grass fence. Uncle Joe's wife, Aunt Natalia, sitting on the verandah, was waiting for him. Coal black in complexion, she was a big woman by any standards-tall and fat. Her hair, a medusa of braids, cascaded to her shoulders framing a heavily painted fleshy round face with lips red like ripe tomatoes. She was dressed in an expensive two-piece blue suit that was almost bursting at the seams.

"Jack! Welcome, my son," she greeted him affectionately stretching a hand heavy with bracelets. "Oh, you've grown into a handsome young man." She paused and

stared at him in a way that was so bold that Jack felt uncomfortable. “You’ll have all the beautiful girls chasing after you like dogs on heat.”

Jack had never met her before. Her marriage to Uncle Joe three years ago had been without any ceremony and she had never been to the village. People at the village knew her only by name.

Taking her hand, Jack was surprised to note that she had she had four-inch red fingernails that looked like talons. He was later to discover that these were artificial nails that were glued on the natural nails.

She led the way into the house, swinging her massive hips in a way Jack found embarrassing. The walls were dirty and the paint peeling. The windows were so small that light barely filtered into the house. Everything in the sitting room looked like what the cat had brought in. There was an old brown sofa set, several armchairs of different designs and a rickety display cabinet. Cockroaches searched for food on the floor as mosquitoes and flies competed for flying space.

He looked at his uncle and aunt, both immaculate in expensive suits. There was something wrong about the whole thing. How could such well to do people choose to live in such a dump?

As he sank into one of the armchairs, he made up his mind that he was leaving the location once he secured a job.

3

Jack concluded that Lilongwe was like some malicious beast of prey that swallowed its thousands each night out of spite only to disgorge them at dawn to face another bleak day. Each morning a sea of people filled the city and as night fell the streets emptied only to be filled again the following morning. He had quickly realized these people were in no better situation than himself.

That afternoon, as the rain still held off, the atmosphere became a breathless furnace sticky with heat. The mass of people jostling in the streets looked hazy in the shimmering heat.

Sitting under the shade of a shop’s awning, Jack watched a thin dog prowl for food. After a fruitless search, it sat down, its head resting on its outstretched front legs. That’s me, thought Jack. He was surprised to realize that the dog exemplified his own situation.

It was two in the afternoon. Since morning, he had been roaming around, going from company to company in search of a job. But like the dog, he had ended up exhausted and frustrated. And with nothing.

The city had let him down-and so had his uncle. Why could a person of his qualifications fail to find a job in such a vast town? And how could a man of his uncle’s influence fail to assist his own nephew to find a job? It all smacked of betrayal.

Which organization had he not he visited in the city? But if he was not turned away by the guard at the gate it would be by an ugly “No Vacancy” sign.

Where he had succeeded in seeing the recruiting officer, the story was not any better. At Central Africa Tobacco Company, the Human Resources Officer, a chubby short man, had looked at his certificate as it was a piece of toilet paper.

“On its own this paper is worthless,” he growled. “Where are the supporting documents?”

Jack stared uncomprehendingly at him.

The man smiled. “I see you’re a green in town. Are you really looking for a job?”

What did the plump dwarf think he was in his office for? “Yes, Sir.”

“Then where is the bread to back your application?”

Jack was disgusted. Still unemployed, where did the toad think he would get the money? “Sir, I’m afraid I don’t have...”

“It doesn’t have to be cash, village boy,” the Human Resources Officer interrupted him with a wave of his hands. “A goat can do. I’m sure you can go back home and fetch a one.”

How could the bastard think he could pay for a clerical job when he had the right qualifications, Jack fumed as he stormed out of the office. And the job was not any better than the one he had ditched at the tobacco estate.

At Zikomo Traders it was as bad. No; it was worse. “Young man, there are no jobs here,” the watchman had told him. But between you and me we can work out something.”

“Like what?” Jack asked skeptically.

“Well, the one who employs people here is my uncle,” the guard confided, “I hear they’re recruiting labourers. You give me something and I’ll talk to him.”

Jack spat. The watchman must be off his rocker. He would never sink so low as to take labouring work. What would people think of him leaving a clerical job in the village only to get a manual job in town? He would never do such a stupid thing.

The tightwad Indian who offered him a job as a Shop Assistant was willing to pay him only half of what he had been getting as a clerk at the tobacco estate. And this was a job he got when he had just left school. If the money he was getting then was not enough, how could he survive on half that amount now?

Every day, he went job hunting. No job came his way. His confidence began to wane. Fear that he may never secure a job began to gnaw at his heart.

That is why now two months down the line, he sat under the shop’s canopy a confused man. Returning to the village was not an option. He would be a laughing stock. A failure. And no-one respects a loser.

The only alternative was to hang on and hope for a miracle. A phenomenon which must come before he run out of money. His faith in his uncle had been misplaced. The man had only made promises out which had come nothing. His uncle was now away on a month long business trip, leaving him with no hope.

“Hi, man!” a voice hissed at his shoulder. “Still in town?”

It was Dodo, a thin young man who sometimes did odd jobs for his aunt. He was in dirty jeans and jacket.

“Hi!” Jack mumbled.

“How are things?”

“Very bad. Came here to find a job but seems the gods are against me.”

Dodo smiled to reveal a row of yellow, rotten teeth. “Don’t blame the gods, brother. Maybe your grandmother put a spell on you so you shouldn’t get a job. Best way of calling you back.”

“Too bad for her; I’m staying on.”

“But how can you survive in town without a job?” Dodo asked with a laugh. “You’ll soon run out of dough; then what are you going to do?”

Jack shrugged. “I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.” He got up. “I’ve got to go back home and rest.”

“You’ll take the short cut?”

Jack nodded and patted his pocket. “Have to save the little bucks I’m left with.”

“Okay. See you around, brother.”

The short cut passed through some bushes along the Lilongwe River. He had just walked a short distance when Jack saw the wallet. It lay in his path, a big wallet pregnant with money. Throwing his eyes around, he saw no-one. He picked it up.

“I saw that,” a voice said from behind as he was about to hide the wallet in his pocket.

Jack turned. It was a tall young man selling cigarettes.

“I just found it; I’ll give it back to the owner,” Jack said lamely.

The cigarette vendor smiled disarmingly. “How’re you going to find the owner? Man, let’s just share the loot.”

They hid themselves in the bushes. Jack opened the wallet. But what he found shocked him. The money was just bundles of paper with a note covering the front and back.

“Man, are you trying to be funny? There was money and not papers in the wallet,” the cigarette vendor snarled.

“But this is the money I found,” Jack croaked.

A knife flicked in the tall youth’s hand. “Just give me the money or I’ll cut you into pieces until I find where you’re hiding the money. Turn out your pockets, now!”

The violence in the words shocked Jack. In his pockets was all the money he was left with. “This is my money. I came with it from the village.”

“Nice try, man. I’ll have that,” the cigarette vendor said relieving Jack of his money and throwing at him the bundles of paper.

“Please, I’m saying the truth. That’s my money and it’s all I got left in the world,” Jack pleaded.

“That’s being greedy, man. I know you’ve most of the loot stashed somewhere on you so I’ll leave you with that. Don’t blame you, I’d have done the same myself, buddy.” He disappeared into the bush.

An hour later, crestfallen, Jack staggered home. He had failed terribly. Now there was no hope of continuing to stay in town. He would have to go back.

He threw himself in an armchair, his looks no different from those of a condemned man. Aunt Natalia appeared in the doorway leading to the bedroom.

“Jack, what happened? Are you hurt?”

“No, aunt,” he answered calmly. “I’ve been killed. I’m dead.”

She came and eased herself on the arm of his chair. “Killed? What do you mean?”

“I’m buried. They’ve killed me: murdered my dream.”

“Take it easy, Jack darling,” she said putting her arms around him. “Tell me what happened.”

Head buried in her roomy bosom, Jack explained his ordeal. After he had finished, she said softly. “No-one can kill your dream, Jack. Don’t they say knock and they shall open?”

Jack sighed. “Aunt, I knocked with a sledge hammer but no-one opened the door. Maybe I shouldn’t have thrown away the magic charm granny gave me.”

Aunt Natalia laughed. “Don’t waste your time thinking of magic charms. You’re such a clever young man that I don’t see how you can fail to get what you want.”

Jack looked up and his eyes met those of his aunt. There was something in the look that he could not place. He knew that look. He had seen it last week, after his uncle left on the month-long business trip. And now here it was again. It unsettled him.

She took his face in his arms. Jack felt hot. He licked his lips and swallowed.

“Jack, you’re a handsome and intelligent boy. It would be a pity to let your life go to ruins,” she purred. “I can help you get a job.”

Jack looked expectantly at his aunt. “Don’t mock me, aunt.”

Aunt Natalia rose and sat in a chair facing Jack. She was in a white flimsy negligee. He made up the outline of her naked body and felt his heart quicken.

“Jack, I’ve always wanted you. Loved you. I want the best for you. I can give you a job if you also give me what I want.”

“Aunt...”

She raised her hand and smiled. “Don’t call me, aunt. Call me Natalia.”

“Aunt...”

“I said call me Natalia,” she insisted. “Make love to me Jack and I’ll give you a job.”

“But...” he still failed to call her by her first name. “But if uncle found out...”

“Who’s going to tell him? Since you and I won’t tell him, he’ll never know.”

Jack took a deep breath. “But it’s not right...”

“Let’s face it, Jack. Don’t you think your uncle would have assisted you get a job if he had wanted to?”

“He would.”

“But he hasn’t. Draw your conclusions from there,” Aunt Natalia said. “What I’m offering is something that’ll make you get what you came to town for.”

Jack shifted uncomfortably in the chair. His aunt was right. What had his uncle done to help him? All he had made were empty promises. Did he owe such a selfish man anything?

Indecision chased across his face. He was being a chance to find a job but at a cost

of betraying his uncle. He wanted a job so badly that he could do anything to get one. But what if his uncle found out?

“Don’t worry about that useless man,” Aunt Natalia said as if reading his thoughts. “You know I can handle him.”

Jack knew what that meant. The big woman ruled Uncle Joe with an iron hand. Since he had arrived, he had more than once seen her pound him with her huge fists. In town his uncle made the tough guys tremble, but at home, he was the one who quaked. What could such a woman be capable of doing? He felt certain his aunt would give him a job.

The tension that had gripped him began to lessen. It was replaced by an odd feeling as he stared at a curve of the hip through the see-through dress. The sensation confused him and at the same time excited him.

Aunt Natalia leaned forward so that their lips were almost touching. Jack’s heart skipped a beat. “I don’t want to force you to do what you don’t want,” she said in a voice as smooth as silk. “I was only opening my heart to you. If you’ll be nice to me, I guarantee you a good job.”

“And if not?”

“The bus home leaves every day. You can be on it tomorrow.”

There it was. If he refused her advances, he would be sent back home and that would not do. He desperately wanted the job.

“But will you really help me get a job?” he asked, looking like a child that is being offered a toy but feels is only being made sport of.

Aunt Natalia went into the bedroom and reappeared with a thick ward of money. “Well, that’s for you to buy some suits before you start working. A cashier has to look presentable.”

Jack looked like a mouse eyeing groundnuts. He was back on track. He just needed to play the game right and he was home and dry.

Outside, there was a flash of lightning and a boom of thunder followed, crashing up and down the sky. Suddenly the heavens opened up like a bursting bladder and the rain began to fall. Jack Guduli. A cashier!

He did not hesitate any longer.

4

Sitting in the back of the big black Mercedes Benz, Jack marveled at the way the car seemed to glide over the badly potholed Phwetekere road. It was as if he was in an airplane. No bumps. Nothing.

The car’s interior was luxurious, the seats made of leather and very comfortable. A powerful CD player filled the car with reggae music. Beside him sat Aunt Natalia exuding some fantastic perfume.

The woman was wonderful, Jack thought. That week they had done nothing but make love. She was not much to look at but she knew how to treat a man in bed. Just

thinking of their love making that week made something stir in his trousers. She had done to him things he never even imagined.

He was surprised that he had not been worried. Something had convinced him that she knew what she was doing and could handle any kick-backs, that is, if any came. In any case, what happened was Uncle Joe's fault. If he had not been so self-centered as to block him from getting a job, all this would not have happened.

She returned his look with a sideways glance. "You look great, Jack," she purred in his ear. "Focus will be impressed."

Jack stared at his faultlessly fitting black suit. This is just the beginning, auntie, he said to himself. Just let me get the job and this whole town will be impressed.

The car left behind the slums and entered the elegant Area 43 suburb. In a big car, passing big houses, Jack felt at home. This is how it's supposed to be. Being chauffeur driven in a nice car going to a cozy home. Not being crammed in a taxi going to a stinking location to be holed up in a fetid crumbling house.

Anyway, he sighed. It was just a matter of time.

The Mercedes Benz stopped outside a large walled compound. The driver hooted and the gate swung open. The car turned into a drive flanked on both sides by palms. Although the sun was just sinking in the west, powerful lights on either side of the driveway were already on.

A doorman in blue suit opened the doors as the car came to a halt outside an imposing entrance of a mansion set in a large green garden. He followed Aunt Natalia into a huge extravagantly furnished lounge.

"This house is magnificent," Jack said with admiration taking in the luxurious furniture.

"Focus has got other houses like this one in other parts of the city," Aunt Natalia said. "This is the smallest of them. The others are rented out to ambassadors."

Jack gaped, amazed. Focus must be a very rich man. He did not doubt that some of the riches would rub off to him.

Jack had imagined Focus to be a bald, fat, benign old gentleman. But the man who came in baffled his imagination. Of middle age, Focus Khobidi was very small and very thin. His body had nothing but skin and bones so that he looked no different from a skeleton covered with a layer of skin. His face was hard, his eyes small and sunk so far as to make his sockets look like black pits.

The thinness did not make him look frail but rather gave him the look of a dangerous man, a man you would not want to meet alone in a dark night. When Jack shook his hand, it was like shaking that of a wrestler.

It was not only the danger he sensed in him. Power, too. He had the look of a man not to be messed with.

Aunt Natalia rose and hugged him. "Focus, darling, I missed you!"

The small man just nodded then went to sit in a sofa facing Jack. Aunt Natalia eased herself beside him.

"Darling, this is the nephew I was talking about," she said, leaning an arm on

Focus's shoulder.

Focus' deep-set eyes ran over Jack. Jack felt a chill up his spine. It was like being looked over by a snake. Jack wondered why the man frightened him.

"Let me see your papers," Focus said in a strange, husky voice that made Jack shiver. It was a voice that would haunt one's dreams.

Jack hastily handed over his certificate.

"An MSCE with a pass. Not bad," Focus said returning his cold beady eyes on Jack. "Have you handled accounts before?"

"I was working at a tobacco estate as a clerk, sir. I handled Stores, Accounts and Wages," Jack replied.

"Good," Focus said thoughtfully. "On Monday, go to Overseas General Traders. They'll employ you as a Cashier."

Jack's eyes widened. "Sir, you mean I should go for interviews?"

Focus rose to his feet, his face hard. "You heard what I said. I never say anything twice.

Jack fell to his knees. "I'm sorry, sir. It's just that it...it... seems unbelievable."

"With me everything is possible. Everything. Just keep that at the back of your mind," Focus said smiling. It was like watching a ghost smile.

"Thank you very much, sir".

"This is nothing," Focus said in his queer voice. "Your aunt is a very good friend of mine. There's a party going on. You may join if you wish."

A servant appeared from nowhere.

"He'll show you," Focus said patting Jack on the shoulder. "Enjoy yourself, young man."

He felt Focus' eyes follow him like a breath of fire as he left the room.

5

The servant led Jack along a maze of corridors. He was surprised that the doors along the corridors had room numbers just like in a motel. The passages ended at a big wooden door. The servant opened the door and ushered Jack into a big room. And there, the party was in full swing.

"What would you like to drink, sir?" a waiter asked.

"Er...Coke"

He stared awkwardly about him as he waited for the drink. The room, half full with young people of around his age, was ornately furnished. Fast beat music belted from a huge stereo.

Jack felt out of place and quickly realized why. He was the only man in the room in a suit. All the others were in expensive fancy clothes. The girls were incredibly beautiful and dressed in clothes that looked as if they had been melted on them. Some were almost naked!

The waiter brought the Coke. Jack was turning to take a seat when suddenly a girl

broke through the crowd and flung her arms around his neck.

“Jack! I’m glad to have met you long at last!”

Jack had to hold his jaw to prevent it from falling into his glass of coke. His eyes threatened to pop out as they took in the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

Tall, she was in a body hugging red satin dress that moulded every curve of her shapely figure. Her hair, tied back with a red ribbon, framed an oval face with big black eyes. Pointed breast breasts stood out like papayas.

“Aunt Natalia has been talking about her handsome nephew,” she said and drew back, staring at him with naked admiration. “She was right-you’re amazing.”

Here among all the young-men, the beautiful girl with a body that could make any man a dribbling idiot was making it open that she fancied him badly! Jack’s heart began to beat fast.

“You’re taking a coke at a party like this,” she asked, rolling her eyes. “You need something to get you into the mood, Jack.”

She disappeared and re-appeared with a glass of brandy. “Here, my darling, is the drink for a real man like you.”

How could he tell such a stunning girl that he did not drink? What would she think of him?

He emptied the glass in one quick swallow. His throat felt on fire. He gasped then started coughing, his eyes watering.

“Hey young man, don’t drink so fast,” the girl said, smiling brightly. “The night’s still young.”

Jack was not so daft not to realize that this was just a ploy to make him save face. He made up his mind not to lose points before the beauty. He drank the brandy careful, taking a mouthful at a time.

“By the way, I’m Sarah Phiri, I do Aunt Natalias hair at the salon,” she said. “She must have told you about me.”

Jack could not remember Aunt Natalia talking about Sarah. But that did not matter. What was important was that Sarah was there with him and thought him handsome.

“Yeah, she talked a lot about you,” he lied. “She says you do her hair very well.”

“Thanks, boy,” she paused and glanced at his glass. “You’ve finished your drink. Let me get you another one.”

After the second drink, his head felt light, his body relaxed. He called for a third one. By the time the glass was empty, he was drunk. He felt great.

“I’m the lucky guy,” he shouted raising his fist.

The words were drowned in the loud music but Sarah heard them and smiled with satisfaction.

“They’re playing it now, my favourite number,” she said taking hold of his arm. “Let’s go and dance.”

They were soon crushed against each other, dancing in the middle of the room. Jack felt his heart quicken. He licked his lips and swallowed, his eyes fixed on Sarah’s face who was dancing with her eyes closed while wiggling her limber body against

his.

Sarah momentarily opened her big eyes, smiled seductively and closed them again. Without knowing it, Jack's mouth went to Sarah's.

She responded enthusiastically, moulding her body into his as they kissed. His erection kicked against her groin. She drew back her head with difficulty. "Let's go and sit somewhere."

He followed her outside the house and sat at a secluded place in the garden. A full moon was rising, the garden full of scents of flowers. Sarah sat on his lap facing him, her hands around his neck.

He slipped his hands over her buttocks and pulled her to him, his mouth finding her lips. As the kissing grew hot, one of his hands went up her thigh into her underwear. She let out a sigh of pleasure.

"Not here," Sarah said "Let's go to my house".

Thirty minutes later, Jack stumbled into Sarah's bedroom. His heart was thumping wildly. They were scarcely in the room and he was undressing her, his hands trembling with eagerness.

"Oh, Jack, don't behave as if you don't have a girlfriend back home," she teased him.

Jack stared at her. "A girl friend?" he asked as if dazed. "I never had a girlfriend".

What about Nabetha, a small voice asked. Nabetha? Compared to Sarah she was not to fit to be called a woman! After all she was his cousin and he had no intention of marrying a cousin.

He scooped her up and lowered her on the bed. Looking at the lithely curved figure, Jack almost choked with desire. He plunged into her.

6

Jack woke with a heavy hang over the following morning. He swung his feet to the floor, cupping his head in his hands, a throbbing pain in his head. He wondered why people drink alcohol when the drink makes them so uncomfortable the following day.

However, thinking of Sarah and the great time they had, he thought it was worth any hang over. He could not remember exactly what happened the previous night or how he got home but everything that he could remember about the night made his body tingle with delight.

Aunt Natalia appeared in the doorway in a night dress that clung to her body carrying a glass of wine in each hand. "Oh, you're now awake, darling. How was last night?"

"Marvelous," he mumbled, wincing. "Auntie, I met the woman of my dreams at the party."

She come over, handed him one of the glasses and sat down beside him. "Who's the fortunate girl?"

"Sarah, a girl I was with at the party."

A shadow crossed her face. "Oh, I know her; she's a good girl. Don't let her down."

Jack licked his lips. "Auntie, I'll stick to her like a tick to a cow. She's the woman I've been looking for."

"I hope you'll not forget you old Auntie Natalia."

"I'll never, Auntie!" Jack said, "All this has happened because of you."

Aunt Natalia stared at him. "You know that?"

"Of course I do."

"Maybe I'm wrong. But I had the impression that you'd forgotten."

Jack laughed. "How can I forget?"

"You just met Sarah yesterday and you already seem to have forgotten about me."

Jack frowned. "I don't understand."

"I also need you. Did you forget that?"

"Need me?"

"It seems you've a short memory, Jack" Aunt Natalia said. "Have you already forgotten the deal we made for me to secure you a job?"

Jack bit his lower lip. "I haven't forgotten. I fulfilled my part of the deal."

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear," Aunt Natalia said thoughtfully. "You'll be making love to me whenever I need you. Not only for a week."

Jack took a deep breath to steady his nerves. What did the hippopotamus want from him? Could she not see that he was his uncle's wife?

"I can't do that. You're married. I've found a girlfriend. I don't want to cheat on her."

Aunt Natalia laughed. "Don't be a hypocrite, Jack. You already cheated on Nabetha. What's wrong with cheating on Sarah?"

"I know everyone in the village expects me to marry Nabetha, but she's my cousin," Jack defended himself.

"There's nothing wrong with that; tradition allows it," Aunt Natalia reminded him.

"But tradition does not allow what we are doing," he countered.

"I don't care what tradition allows or does not allow," she said viciously. "What I want I get and to hell with tradition!"

Jack's temper rose. "I won't let you control my life," he blurted. "You and I are through. Period."

"Are you serious, Jack?" she sneered.

"Yes," he confirmed. "I'll never touch you again."

"I'm not so sure about that Jack," she said coldly. "Don't they say he who pays the piper calls the tune?"

Jack was silent.

"I'm the one who told Focus to give you a job," she went on in a flat voice. "I can tell him to cancel the offer."

"You wouldn't do that."

"Why not?"

Jack was exasperated. "I'm your nephew, why do this to me?"

"You're Joe's nephew," came the reply. "If I hadn't married him, you'd just be like

any other young man to me. In fact, that's what you are to me, a young man I want."

Jack shook his head.

"Now listen carefully, Jack. I always get what I want. By any means necessary," she said coldly. "I want you and I'll get you".

Jack felt sick. Her aunt was crazy. "I'll tell Uncle Joe about your affair with Focus."

Aunt Natalia smiled. "Ah so you noticed that, very perceptive of you. You do that and I'll tell him that you raped me. Just imagine what he'll do to you. So, telling won't gain you anything."

Too late now, Jack saw the web Aunt Natalia had weaved. He was a fry caught in her web, with no way out. His fate was in her hands. Antagonising her would mean having whatever he had achieved so far crashing around him. Would Sarah want a jobless boyfriend?

He had already made love to her. What difference would it make not doing it now? And it was time he learned to survive in the cutthroat life in town. Like his aunt, he should always strive to get what he wanted. By any means possible. After all, one only lives once.

Still, he did not feel comfortable about it. He continued to sit on the bed, looking at his feet, deep in thought. Aunt Natalia watched silently him with an amused look on her face.

Was there any way out of this, he asked himself with desperation. He found none. He needed to face the harsh fact that without Aunt Natalia he was finished in the city. It was either he submit to her wishes or go back to the village. He had already ruled going back to the village so the only option was to play along with whatever she wanted. After all it was just a temporary arrangement.

His mind made up, he felt relieved, as if a great burden had been lifted off his shoulders. "Then what are we waiting for?" he asked suddenly, a disarming smile on his face.

Aunt Natalia put her glass on a stool and stood up. "Now let me show you what sex means."

She let her dress fall and he was surprised she did not have a stitch on!

7

Jack lay spread- eagled, his limbs tied to stakes. He could hear her sharpen the knife. Then she came, a small, thin old woman with the face like that of a monkey. She stood over him and slowly raised the knife, hate radiating out of her sunken eyes.

He tried to free himself, but to no avail. He wanted to scream for help. But no words came out. It seemed as if his tongue had turned to cotton. The old woman drove the knife towards his heart. Jack let out a horrible scream. He woke with a start sweating profusely.

"What's the matter?" Aunt Natalia asked, sitting up beside him.

Jack sat up and swung his legs to the floor. "I was having a nightmare."

Aunt Natalia drifted back to sleep leaving Jack staring at the floor between his feet. For some time, he remained like that. What did the dream mean? Anyway, he must not let it spoil his first day at work.

He took a quick bath and ate breakfast hurriedly. It was not good to be late on his first day.

“Have a nice day, darling.” Aunt Natalia said, winking at him.

Jack shook his head and smiled. “You know what, Natalia?”

She stared expectantly at him. It was the first time he had called her without the “aunt”.

“I’m starting to fall in love with you,” he said gaily.

She kissed him fully on the mouth and he returned the kiss avidly.

“I love you, Jack. I’ve very big plans for us. Together,” she paused and stared at him in a way that frightened him. “Together, we’re going to go far. Very far. Just trust me.”

Offices of Overseas Traders were situated in the City Centre in a big four storey building.

“Can I help you, sir?” a young woman asked at the reception.

“I’d like to see Mr. Khethe, the Human Resources Manager,” Jack replied.

The receptionist smiled. “Do you’ve an appointment, sir?”

“No.”

“I’m afraid he only sees visitors on appointment.”

Jack put a hand on his hip. “Tell him Jack Guduli would like to see him,” he said authoritatively.

She picked up a phone and dialed a number. “Mr. Guduli to see you, sir.”

After a moment, she put down the phone. She got to her feet. “Let me show you his office, sir.”

He followed her along a corridor. At the far end, she knocked on a door and opened it without waiting for a reply.

“Mr. Guduli, sir,” she said and quickly left.

It was a big and well- furnished office. Khethe, a fat, bald man sat behind a big mahogany desk.

“Welcome, Jack,” he said jovially offering his hand. “I’m Nick Khethe, HRM for this Company.”

Jack took the hand and shook it firmly.

“Take a seat, please,” Khethe said “I was expecting you.”

He picked a folder. “Congratulations on your appointment as Cashier. In this folder you’ll find your Job Description. Now let me show you your office.”

He led the way up stairs and opened a door. Jack was ushered into an office furnished with a small desk, a black swivel chair and two visitors’ chairs.

“This is your office, Jack,” Khethe said, “Please feel at home.”

When Khethe had left the office, Jack literally jumped with joy then threw himself into the swivel chair. He had begun his journey at an excellent note. A good job. An elegant office. A beautiful girl friend. Sleeping with Aunt Natalia was a small price

he was willing to pay.

It would have been a perfect day but for something that was nagging at him. The nightmare he had last night...why could he not shake it off?

8

It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon. The sky was crystal blue, the air full of scents of flowers. Jack and Sarah sat on a bench in the hotel garden.

"I still think it's not right," Jack said putting down his glass of juice on a stool. "I'm supposed to be the one taking you out and not vice-versa.

Sarah, lying on her back on the bench and resting her head on Jack's lap, smiled lazily. "I don't see where your concern is. I'm doing this because you've just started working."

Jack bit his lower lip. "I know. But a man is the one who's supposed to take the woman out."

Sarah smiled. "Why is it supposed to be like that?"

Jack nipped a flower and gently stroked her face with it. "Err...it's always been like that."

"Things are changing, honey," Sarah said, the lazy smile fixed on her face. "Gone are the days when the man did everything for the woman."

"I was born and bred in the village. I believe a man must fend for the woman. Not the other way around."

"There's gender equality these days," Sarah said with a soft laugh. "So, stop thinking a woman's place is the kitchen only."

"Well, whatever you say, I still think I'm being unfair to you. It's like I'm taking advantage of you."

Since he had started working a week ago, Sarah had been taking him out to lunch every day. He had tried to discourage her but she had been adamant. She would turn up unannounced at lunch hour leaving him no option but to accept her invitations.

Jack was not happy with the way things were going and he indicated this to Aunt Natalia when he got back home that night.

"She's been paying for my lunch since last Monday," he confided to Aunt Natalia while in bed with her. "It really embarrasses me."

Aunt Natalia leaned on her elbow and smiled at him mischievously. "Then do something about it instead of whining. There are lots of men after beautiful girls like Sarah."

"But what can I do? I don't have money to take her out."

Aunt Natalia kissed him on the cheek. "You find the money. That will solve your problem."

"Where can I find the money?" Jack returned grimly. "I can't get an advance because I'm new at the company and my salary isn't due until the end of the month."

Aunt Natalia laughed, rubbing her hands together. "You know your biggest

problem, Jack?”

Jack stared at her askance, lines creasing his forehead.

“You let circumstances control your life,” she said seriously. “A man of your abilities should be able to control his destiny.”

Jack scratched his chin. “I don’t understand...”

“Look here, Jack,” Aunt Natalia said gently. “You’re complaining that you don’t have money to buy your girlfriend lunch yet every day you handle large sums of money.”

“I don’t get you.”

“Is there anything you understand?” she asked patiently. “Do I always have to explain even things that are so clear?”

“I know I handle a lot of money,” Jack said. “But that’s company money, I can do nothing with it.”

“Do nothing with it!” Aunt Natalia sneered. “You mean you can die of thirst while your feet are in the water?”

“Natalia, the money belongs to the company. If I were to take even a coin that would amount to theft.”

Aunt Natalia shrugged. “Who said you should steal?”

Jack glanced at her, confusion painted on his face. “I don’t get what you’re trying to say...”

Aunt Natalia softly massaged the nape of his head. “I know I can trust you, Jack. Focus runs businesses which, although not exactly legal, makes a lot of profits. You can borrow money from the company, invest it in one of his businesses and return the money without the company knowing. A day or two would be enough.”

Jack looked at Aunt Natalia thoughtfully. His job at the company involved banking the company’s money on a daily basis. That coming Friday he would be banking a very large amount of cash from the company’s sales of agricultural produce. If he could take the money, use it over the weekend and return it on Monday, would that not make him a tidy profit?

“But what kind of business can one do in a day or two to make a profit?” he asked skeptically.

Aunt Natalia lowered her voice. “Gold. He buys the gold cheaply from Mozambicans and sell it at a hefty profit to South Africans. He can buy and sell the same day.”

Jack was silent for a moment. “If one put in say 30 million, how much profit can one expect?”

“Not less than 5 million kwacha,” Aunt Natalia answered quickly.

“If say I gave him the money on Friday, could I get it back on Monday morning including the profit?”

“Guaranteed. I’d even make sure you get 10 million, Jack.”

Now Jack’s greed was whetted. With that kind of money, he could buy himself a car, move into a mansion in the suburbs thereby freeing himself from the clutches of Aunt Natalia. And marry beautiful Sarah. The idea steeled his resolve to go ahead with the plan.

“What’re you thinking, Jack?”

Jack realized that he had been thinking aloud. That was a very dangerous thing to do.

“What I can do with a cool 10 million!” he decided not to lie.

She slipped her hand into his trousers. Jack gasped with pleasure. “There’s more to come, Jack. Just stick by me and you will see.”

“Then make the arrangements; tell Focus I will give him 30 million on Friday and I will need it back on Monday together with 10 million profit.

9.

“Hi, darling,” a prostitute urinating outside the grass fence of a small bar said as he approached the motel, the bag of money slung over his shoulder. “I can go with you and give you a good time at half the usual charges.”

Jack moved on without answering. The prostitute cursed him obscenely until he was out of earshot. Jack did not mind. Aunt Natalia had said he needed to meet Focus at a place where no one could recognise them and the decrepit rest house provided such a venue.

A large rotting sign announced that he had arrived at his destination—a big tumble-down building that looked like it would crumble any time. He kicked the door open. A reception clerk in a dirty blue uniform welcomed him.

“Short time or for the whole night?” the clerk inquired.

Jack did not understand what short time meant but decided not to ask. “For the whole night.”

“That will be one thousand if you want a receipt,” the clerk said winking at him. “Half of that, no receipt.”

Jack gave him a 500 kwacha note. It was better that way as no one would ever know that he had checked into the motel.

“If you want company,” the clerk paused and made a sign of breasts on his chest. “I can arrange it. A beauty to give you a wonderful night.”

“My girlfriend will join me later in the night,” Jack said with a smile. “She’s big and with an equally big appetite. I want to reserve my energy for her.”

The clerk laughed to show a row of uneven teeth. “Very clever of you. You know some of these sex queens drain you so that you can’t even get it up the following morning.”

He went into his room. The room was small and the walls dirty. It was devoid of any furniture save a bed and a small stool. He checked under the bed then locked the door, setting the stool against it.

The room was full of heavy cloying smell of female perfume coming from the beddings. That explained the short time the clerk had inquired about. The enterprising fellow also rented the rooms for short time sexual encounters apart from pocketing

the money for which he did not issue receipts. Moaning sounds and grunts from the rooms on both sides of his room confirmed his guess. No wonder the place was falling apart.

He had great confidence in Aunt Natalia. He knew she would pull this off. But once that was done, she would be in for a great shock. He swallowed savouring the idea with satisfaction. He lay on the bed to wait.

A rap on the door grabbed his attention. He glanced at his wrist watch as he sat up. It was seven in the evening. The knock came again. This time louder.

“Who’s it?” he asked.

“It’s me Joe, your uncle,” a voice he immediately recognized said.

Jack was surprised. Uncle Joe was not supposed to be back until the following week. Maybe there had been a change in plans. He removed the stool and opened the door.

Uncle Joe stood in the doorway, his face obscured by a slouch hat pulled to the eyes and the turned-up collar of his heavy gray great coat.

Jack had never seen him dressed like this. What was his uncle playing at dressed like a gangster?

Uncle Joe stepped in and closed the door behind him. He dipped his right hand inside the pocket of his coat.

“Why are you holed in this dirty room, Jack?” he asked coldly.

The menace in Uncle Joe’s voice startled Jack. He caught Uncle Joe’s eyes and fear immediately drilled into his vitals. The eyes held the glazed look of a mad man.

“Didn’t...didn’t Aunt Natalia tell you?” Jack spluttered.

Uncle Joe’s hand came out of his pocket. A sharp knife gleamed in the dull light. “She told me and that’s why I’m here.”

Jack stared at him, his eyes bulging, his mouth opening and closing silently like that of a dying fish out of water. The sick expression in Uncle Joe’s eyes frightened him.

“You ungrateful dog, how can you have the audacity to rape your aunt after all I have done for you? How?”

Jack’s heart leapt, sweat starting out on his face. He had been convinced or rather Aunt Natalia had convinced him that his uncle would never find out.

“How...how...”

“Since when did you develop a stammer, Jack?” Uncle Joe scoffed. “Sit down.”

Jack hardly had any strength to stand and was glad to sit down. He had the feeling that his uncle was going to kill him.

“I never raped my aunt,” Jack tried desperately to wiggle out the situation. “Whoever told you that was lying.”

“You want to tell me your aunt would lie about you raping her?” Uncle Joe asked reasonably, putting the knife back in his pocket. “Why would she do that?”

Jack’s heart sank. Nothing seemed to make sense. Why would Aunt Natalia betray him?

Uncle Joe moved without warning. Leaping like a leopard, his hands settled around Jack's neck. Struggling wildly, Jack tried to remove the hands but their grip was like that of a metal clamp.

Jack began to choke, the face of his uncle glaring at him beginning to blur. There was roaring in his ears. He knew this was the end. Then suddenly the pressure was released as Uncle Joe gave a shriek of agony and jerked upwards. Then he slowly collapsed on the floor, a knife sticking in his back.

Jack closed his eyes and shook his head. When he opened them again, he saw the huge frame of Aunt Natalia. Beside her was Focus Khobidi.

"What a mess you have created, Jack," Focus said in his husky voice. "Raping your uncle's wife and killing him when he confronted you. How are you going to get out that?"

Focus knelt by Uncle Joe's body and as he yanked out the knife, a rope materialised from nowhere in Aunt Natalia's hands and looped around his neck. Focus tried to remove the rope that was choking him but he was no match to the mountainous woman. Soon his lifeless body collapsed over Uncle Joe's.

Aunt Natalia glanced at Jack who sat bewildered on the bed shaking like a leaf in the gale. "These fools disgusted me," she said spitting at the bodies. "They were happy to stay at the bottom of the criminal food chain to scramble for left overs like hyenas. They refused to deal in the real money spinning stuff. I'm changing all that and taking the organization to new heights."

"But I thought you said Focus was a rich guy?" Jack asked.

"Rich? Everything that happened was part of my plan to make you act in the way I wanted. I had Dodo set up that wallet trick in order to make you desperate. That place where we met Focus was a motel. The Mercedes Benz was hired by myself. I had to sleep with that fool of a manager for him to give you that cashier job. The girl, Sarah, was a prostitute I hired to build up your greed to steal the money."

Jack could only stare at her open mouthed.

"Fortunately everything has happened the way I wanted it to. I'm now taking over Focus' organization and venturing into hard core stuff: drug dealing and human trafficking. All I lacked was money, which thanks to you, now I have. You have the option of joining me," she paused and indicated the dead bodies with a motion of her head. "Or them. Nod your head if you're joining me."

Jack did not doubt that this was not an idle threat. Now he desperately wished he had never left the village. But it was now too late. He had been careless to dine with the devil without using a long spoon and he was now paying the consequences. There was no other choice but to nod his head and he did that vigorously for emphasis. He had no desire of joining the heap of bodies on the floor.

"Wise choice," Aunt Natalia said with a winning smile.

Jack knew he was still not safe. "What about the money I've stolen? Won't I go to prison for that?"

"Your old life Jack has ended today. The police will think you have run away with

the money. They'll look for you but will never find you because I'll create a new identity for you. You can never, never meet anyone you knew before," Aunt Natalia said.

Jack was now sweating with desperation. "What'll happen to my certificate?"

Aunt Natalia laughed. "Forget that piece of paper, dude. You'll never need it again. You're now Jazzy, my right-hand man."

"What about them?" he indicated the dead bodies.

"Don't worry about them. These're known criminals. Sorry to disappoint you but your uncle was the right-hand man in Focus' criminal gang. When their dead bodies are found in this seedy motel, the police will think they died in a criminal transaction gone wrong," she said. "One last thing, can you pick up the knife, please?"

Jack bent and picked up the knife. As he rose, Aunt Natalia took shots with her cell phone camera.

"What was that for?" Jack asked, alarmed.

Aunt Natalia showed him the pictures. He looked like a murderer in some horror movie. "It's for insurance in case you decide to get out of line, Jazzy. Always remember this is enough to convict you for the murders. Now take the money and let's get out of this slaughterhouse."

Jack now realized that Aunt Natalia had him fully in her claws. With those pictures he could go down for murder if he dared refuse her wishes. Like the genie in the Arabian Nights stories, he was her prisoner, her wishes her commands.

As they crossed the motel lobby he saw the clerk's dead body behind the reception desk. Jack now saw that Aunt Natalia had planned everything. He had simply been a foot soldier in her campaign. He resigned to the fact that he was now one of Aunt Natalia's chattels.



The Hammer of God

The rest house room contrasted very sharply with its occupant. The walls were full of holes and desperately needed a fresh coat of whitewash. Covering the thin mattress were threadbare and stained blankets. The light filtering in palely through the small dirty window revealed a bit of stale bread standing on a rickety table.

Yet the man standing before the small cracked mirror looked every inch the image of a typical successful Pentecostal preacher. The shiny red suit fitted him faultlessly as did the matching black pointed shoes. His shirt, with a reverend's collar, was of a purple satin. He completed the picture with curly black hair worn in an afro wig style.

But the rest house, located in the sprawling slum of Ndirande, suited his pocket and purpose perfectly. It was the cheapest accommodation he could find close to his destination in the neighbouring affluent suburb of Nyambadwe.

He had eyes only for his picture in the mirror that he failed to see the huge rat that suddenly poked its nose out of one of the many crevices in the walls of the room. It stared at him for some time like a dog surveying new surroundings. Satisfied, it climbed down the wall then up the wobbly table towards the piece of bread.

"I'm Prophet John," he said to the man in the mirror in the fashion of Pentecostal preachers. "How do you expect to be blessed when you're not giving to the Lord and his anointed messenger? There're people here who do not give, I know you. You cannot hide from God's prophet. If you do not give, all your wealth will wilt like a plant that is not watered," he paused and laughed, pleased with himself. "Yes! Behold, a new prophet has arisen and that prophet is...me!"

Contented with his looks, he stretched his hand to pick the slice of bread that was to be his meal that afternoon. A frightened gasp escaped his mouth as his hand almost pounced on the rat's stubby body.

But the rat ducked with surprising speed and disappeared into one of the holes. The pest had almost gobbled up the whole piece of bread. Rather than get angry, he laughed. It was his own fault. What was an intelligent man like him doing in the stinking rodent infested room? He was supposed to be making money rather than fighting over a piece of musty bread with a rat.

While his looks could make him pass for a preacher, he was not a man of the cloth at all. In fact, he had been many things before: a witchdoctor, a businessman, a policeman and all sorts of professions as the situation demanded.

He was masquerading as a prophet because it was the most profitable profession at the moment. Fake men of God were swimming in money milked from their gullible flocks. He had heard that the Sinoyas, the couple that were to be on the receiving end of his scam that day, were committed wealthy born-again Christians and had a daughter who was sick. Dyed-in-the-wool Christians were the easiest to dupe—they believed anything a prophet told them as long as they were told it came from God.

His eyes went to his wrist watch. It was approaching one o'clock; the time to make his move. He picked up a small wooden cross and a bible which he had stolen from a motel a few weeks ago.

The big rat was out of its hole again, staring at him, whiskers trembling. He ignored

it, ignored the cockroaches scavenging for food, the mosquitoes that had given him a sleepless night and let himself out of the room.

For an October afternoon, it was unseasonably cool which of course was good for him. It would not do for him to arrive at his destination drenched in sweat.

Out of the location he walked, disregarding the eyes staring at him the way he had paid no heed to the vermin in the rest house room. He could feel their question: what was such a stylishly dressed man of God doing in the location? He marched on, leaving behind the bare and ugly Ndirande Mountain after which the township had taken its name, his shiny shoes kicking up squirts of dust in the garbage-strewn dirt road.

When he arrived in Nyambadwe, it was as if he was in another world. Beautiful mansions stood in walled compounds. The air was heavy with scents of flowers. Shrubs adorned the sides of the paved roads. He knocked at one of the gates with the cross. A uniformed guard immediately opened it. The guard was about to say something then took in his priesthood collar and changed his mind.

“What can I do for you, reverend?”

“Alleluia, I’m Prophet John, my son,” the prophet announced solemnly. “Mr. Sinoya is expecting me.”

The guard’s face looked uncertain. “You...you’ve an appointment, Sir?”

The prophet made a sign of the cross. “My appointments are made by Jesus. Where I’m not allowed, I dust my feet and go away. I’ll leave if you feel I’m a menace here, my son.”

“No...No, prophet,” the guard said hastily. “Please sign the visitors’ book. I’ll show you in.”

The house, a two storey building, was set in the middle of a large garden filled with flowers. The guard escorted him up to the front of the house and handed him over to a servant in a safari suit. The servant led the way into the house. He found himself in a huge, lavishly furnished lounge. A luxurious red wall to wall carpet covered the floor. There were three sofa sets and two glass coffee tables. An entertainment unit held a big television screen and a big stereo. The prophet nodded with satisfaction when he noted the Nigerian pastor performing miracles on the TV. He ignored the servant’s invitation to sit down, gluing his attention on the TV screen.

First to come into the sitting room was Mr Sinoya, a very short and very fat man of about fifty. His wife, who followed a moment later, was a tall and very beautiful woman with a lush, provocative figure.

“Welcome, reverend. I don’t believe we have met before. Please take a seat,” Mr Sinoya said waving him towards one of the sofa sets.

The prophet did not take the offer. Instead, he hunched his shoulders and shook himself the way a chicken shakes water off its feathers. “Makhaya lisondolo,” he said in tongues. “We’ve never met but the Lord has already revealed you to me. I’m Prophet John from Nsanje. This is my first visit to Blantyre.”

“You’re welcome, man of God,” Mr Sinoya said with a smile.

“Beloved, I spent the last seven days on Mulanje Mountain, without food or water.

And there, starved, as I dangled between life and death, the Lord appeared to me in thunder and lightning. He was very angry. Very angry with you,” he said pointing a finger at Mr Sinoya. He hunched his shoulders, then pointed at Mrs Sinoya. “And you.”

The prophet walked to the window, his back to the Sinoyas. Now he was going to go through the ticklish part. He needed to speak with confidence and authority. As long as they believed he was God’s mouthpiece, they would do whatever he commanded them no matter how lame it sounded. He had seen other so called powerful men of God do it. It was no different from theft by trick but being pushed to a very high level.

“God blessed you with wealth and a child. You lacked nothing. So how could you dare steal from Him?” he asked almost in a whisper, paused and then spun round and shouted. “How?”

The prophet glared at the Sinoyas, allowing the question to point at them like a knife at their throats. Their response was to stare at him with a mixture of astonishment and veneration.

“And the Lord told me that in his righteous anger, he has allowed the devil to visit your daughter with sickness as a punishment for your thieving,” the prophet continued harshly. “But the Lord being merciful has sent me like Jonah to warn you to repent or face the destruction of your only daughter.”

Fear was outside couple’s faces like masks. “What...what should we do man of God?” whispered Mr Sinoya.

“Like Belshazzar in the old good book, you’ve been weighed and found lacking,” the prophet declared with icy finality. “Your daughter has been taken away from you as your punishment. She’s dead only that you don’t know it.”

Mrs Sinoya threw herself at the prophet’s feet, her arms raised in supplication. “Man of God, please help us; we don’t want to lose our only child.”

The prophet’s face was as hard as tombstone. “You know silver and gold belongs to God. The Lord is very angry with you. You’ve all these riches while his servants suffer. The Lord has told me to command you to return all that you have stolen from Him or disease and death shall not leave this house!”

Mrs Sinoya turned to her husband accusingly. “I told you that we should be giving ten percent of our income as tithes. See where our cheating has landed us.”

“Thieves! You’ve never tithed,” screamed the prophet. “You give to the Lord some money but not the ten percent as commanded by the Lord in the good old book and that is not a tithes!”

“What you’re saying is true man of God. So, what should we do?” Mr Sinoya wanted to know.

The prophet knew he had them where he wanted them to be. He now went into a trance. “Likhaya masondolo libosaya likheterere!” It was now the Holy Spirit talking as the man of God shook violently.

The Sinoyas cowered before him in awe. Then the Holy Spirit departed and calm returned to the prophet. “This is what the Lord has just told me. Through me, the prophet that God has sent to you, make good to the Lord what you’ve been stealing

from Him freely and of your own accord or God will strike your daughter dead by the time I leave this house. The life of your daughter is in your hands.”

“We shall obey the Lord’s commands,” Mr Sinoya croaked.

“Amen,” echoed Mrs Sinoya.

“Then do what the Lord has commanded without further ado and your daughter will be healed,” declared the prophet. “Mr Sinoya, you will stay here and prepare the restoration of what you looted from the Lord while I ...”

The words the prophet was about to say died in his throat as he suddenly staggered rearward as if hit by a truck and crashed in a heap in a corner. He leapt off the floor in a flying tackle that obviously sent his opponent reeling.

“Come on, interloper. I’ll send you back to the fiery pits of hell where you belong!” the prophet shouted bouncing on the balls of his feet like a boxer.

He ducked, screaming, “You’re a laar, Beelzebub!” He threw a punch, “Have that, Lord of the flies.” Then he followed with a quick succession of blows. Finally, he bodily picked the invisible enemy and threw him out of a window.

He took out a bottle of anointing water from the pocket of his jacket and started splaying the contents around the room. “In the mighty name of Jesus, I bind all demons and cast them in fiery pits of hell. Holy ghost fire, burn the devil, burn burn burn burn!” he shouted and then began speaking in tongues.

“He’s gone, he’s gone,” he muttered. “Thank you, Jesus.”

“What... what was happening?” Mrs Sinoya asked, filled with awe.

It took a full minute for the prophet to regain his normal composure. “The fiend was in this house. He attacked me.”

“The fiend...?”

“Yes, the old serpent was right here in this house. He wanted to kill me so that I should not fulfil the mission God has given me to heal your daughter,” said the prophet. “But the devil is a laar!”

“Amen, prophet. I’ve always told my husband that our Lord is good,” chipped in Mrs Sinoya with reverence. “He would never allow evil triumph over good.”

Mr Sinoya looked at the prophet with respect. “My wife has always said that the Lord would heal our daughter. I should confess I was losing faith. As the Lord revealed to you, we’ve a daughter who is struck by a strange ailment.”

“So did the Lord tell me,” interposed the prophet.

“We’ve tried all we could to get her cured but...”

“I know. You’ve done everything you could do but to no avail,” commented the prophet.

“That’s right, man of God” confirmed Mr Sinoya. “Nothing seems to work. What happens is this...”

The prophet cut him with a wave of his wooden cross. “The good Lord has already told me what happens and what is to be done to heal her.”

“I told you that the Lord will never allow our faith to be tested beyond our limits,” Mrs Sinoya said to her husband.

“Woman, without your faith your daughter would have passed on by now,” the prophet said. “Consider your daughter cured. Now lead me to her as your husband is preparing to restore to the Lord what you two thieves have been looting.”

The prophet followed Mrs Sinoya upstairs where she opened a door and ushered him into spacious bedroom. The vision that met the prophet’s eyes bowled him over. Sitting on a big bed was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. He could almost see her alluring curvaceous figure through the see through negligee that she wore. Her face was oval shaped, her eyes large. The prophet stared at her as if he had never seen a woman.

His plan behind visiting the Sinoyas was to gain their trust as a prophet and then milk them of their money by various demands which he would have said were coming from the Lord. By the time they would have realized they had been conned he would have been in another city disguised as someone else.

But he was gripped by a sexual craving like that of a dog on heat. In his life as a conman, he was always meeting girls. But none of them had attracted him the way the girl did. Other plans began to come into his crooked mind. He had to sleep with this girl.

Although he was blinded by red lust, he retained enough presence of mind not to show this. He turned and started moving around the room on tiptoes while sniffing the air.

“He is here,” he hissed

“Who, if I may ask, man of God?” Mrs Sinoya asked.

The prophet whirled around, his finger on his lips. “Shhh, I can smell him, the evil one, the old dragon is in here. Don’t make the slightest move.”

The prophet continued to slink about the room while still sniffing the air. Suddenly he leapt and grabbed the curtains. Mrs Sinoya could see him struggling with something wrapped in the curtains. The unseen adversary broke free and the prophet was flung against the wall. When he got back to his feet, it was clear his unseen enemy had escaped through the window.

“Away, devil! You’ve no power over the anointed of God,” he shouted after the fleeing demon, the words dissolving into unintelligible mutterings, his whole body vibrating.

The prophet was satisfied to see Mrs Sinoya rush to the window in time to see black crows flying away while cawing eerily. That was a good sign. Although he did not believe in God, a thought crossed his mind that even God was supporting what he was doing. Why else had He sent the crows at the opportune time? Ecstatic, he threw back his head and howled. For some time, he prayed while jumping up and down, then he calmed.

“Thank you, Jesus, for the revelation,” he said, then turned to Mrs Sinoya and pointed at the crows. “That’s the spawn of Satan fleeing.”

All Mrs Sinoya could do was cross herself at this ghastly sight. It was so comical that had it been at another time the prophet could have laughed. But he told himself that this was not a comedy. A family was going to be cleaned out and a daughter raped. It was a tragedy.

“Now leave us alone, please,” continued the man of God. “You’ll go and keep on praying together with your husband until I’m through. Under no circumstances are you to disturb my prayers.”

Mrs Sinoya nodded, her face radiating with hope, then went out closing the door behind her.

The prophet stood rooted where she had left him, his mind in turmoil. Things had gone on far much well than he had hoped. He had not really thought the Sinoyas would give him what he had termed as ‘stolen money from the Lord’ there and then. The best he had hoped was that after praying for their daughter they would ‘bless’ him with some money. That was the how Pentecostal Christians normally blessed prophets who prayed for them. And to Pentecostal Christians, ‘blessing’ a prophet meant giving him gifts and money.

He still could not understand how an intelligent couple like the Sinoyas had so easily fallen for a simple trick like his. Anyway, it was no concern of his. What was important was that they would give him the money they believed they had been stealing from God. It was obvious that this going to be a large sum of money. The fake man of God could almost feel the thick ward of cash he was going to depart with from the house. He swallowed with anticipation.

His mind went back to the girl. God, he would kill two birds with one stone. Make love to her as well as get money from her parents. Planned properly he could do this several times before disappearing. Strangely, he wished the rat was there to see that he was not a man to be messed up with.

It would be easy, he thought. Clearly the girl was suffering from a strange illness. He would simply tell her that the disease came from the devil and the Lord had commanded that he should sleep with her to cure it.

His mind made up, he went to sit on the edge of the bed near the girl. The girl looked healthy but only depressed. The prophet guessed it was simply some sort of a psychological disease.

“My daughter, I’m Prophet John. The Lord has sent me to cure you of your disease.”

The girl looked at him with eyes full of dejection. “I cannot be healed. Others have tried and failed.”

The prophet crossed himself. “This time you’ll be cured because it is Jesus himself who’ll cure you. It’s only the body that belongs to Prophet John. The spirit inside is that of Jesus.”

The girl showed faint signs of interest.

Prophet John started praying at the top of his voice in a strange language. Like in the sitting room, the only words one could pick up was the word alleluia and the name of Jesus. After two minutes, he stopped.

“My daughter, like the man who was healed at the pool of Bethsaida after so many years, today is the day you get healed,” the prophet said in a commanding voice. “If you believe this say a loud Amen.”

This seemed to have motivated the girl. “Amen!”

“Louder, child of God!”

“Amen!”

“I can’t hear you, daughter!”

“Amen!” she howled elatedly.

“Yes, the Lord has heard that. My daughter, our bodies are the cities of God which the evil one invades and occupies, binding us in affliction! But I’ll burn the devil with Holy Ghost fire. Get Up!”

The girl got off the bed.

“I’ll hug you and Holy Ghost fire will come from my body and burn all the sickness in your body,” the prophet said.

He hugged the girl and started praying in tongues. “Do you feel the fire?”

The girl knitted her brows. “No, prophet.”

The prophet prayed some more in tongues. “God is telling me that the clothes we’re wearing were made in the devil’s factory deep down under the ocean and they’re blocking your healing. Let’s take them off!”

The girl seemed to hesitate.

The prophet brought his face close to the girl’s. “The penalty for disobeying the Lord’s command is a terrible death, child,” he hissed. “Do you want to risk the Lord’s righteous wrath as did the people of Sodom and Gomorrah?”

The girl undressed and so did the man of God.

“I will touch every part of your body that the devil has cast a spell on, resist not or you’ll die!” the prophet ordered in a whisper. “Now go and lie on the bed facing the heavens.”

The girl went to lay on the bed, her breasts standing like hillocks. The prophet wet his lips and swallowed with desire. “Out, in Jesus name,” he shouted his hands cupping her breasts.

His right hand went to her pubic hair. “Out, devil!” he paused and run his fingers through the dense bush, “Where are you hiding, cursed of God?” his fingers found the lips of her private parts. “Ah found you!” he croaked as the fingers spread the lips, then went inside probing and burning demons.

The girl moaned, involuntarily undulating her hips, her breasts thrust forward, her nipples as hard as marbles. The prophet stood mother-naked over her, his manhood standing erect above her like a cobra about to strike.

Gripping his erected private part like a gun, he declared “This is the hammer of God and with this I’m going to ground the devil’s chains of sickness to dust. Spread your legs apart and let the hammer do its work!”

“Out! Out!” the man of God screamed with each thrust of his ‘hammer’ until the hammer released its special anointing.

“You’re healed, my daughter,” the prophet said, dressing. “Tell no one, including your parents of how you have been healed. If you do, your sickness will return and you will die.”

As he was going back to the living room, pain as he had never experienced cut

through his stomach. It was sharp, searing pain that made the prophet feel like he had been disembowelled. He doubled over, paralysed with the unbearable pain. Then the agony was gone as suddenly as it had started. He was surprised that he was sweating profusely and had problems climbing down the steps leading back to the sitting room.

In the lounge he found the Sinoyas waiting expectantly for him. There were so many bundles of notes on the table that some notes even littered the floor. He was now rich. All he needed to do now was collect the loot and disappear.

“The devil is a laar; I’ve prayed for your daughter. She’s now free from the curse of the evil one,” the Prophet said wiping sweat from his brow. He felt dizzy and had to sit down. “I...I’ve to be on my way. Thanks for putting your trust in the Lord.”

“Thanks prophet, you’ve taken a load off our backs. It was really terrible. This curse of hers,” Mrs Sinoya said.

The prophet shook his head. The Sinoyas looked ill-defined, as if they were wrapped in a fog. There was something wrong with him. He shook his head to clear his vision.

“We have to confess, prophet. Our daughter ran away and started er...er...,” Mr Sinoya said and then seemed to fail to find the right word.

“Prostitution,” Mrs Sinoya finished for him. “If she slept with a man, the man would just start rotting until he died. It was really a terrible disease. It would start with a sharp pain in the stomach that made the person feel as if he had been gutted. I used to call it a hammer of God-the Lord’s strike at the wicked.”

If they had expected another jubilant ‘the devil is a laar’ they were disappointed. Instead, the prophet screamed as if he had been knifed.



Mirror, Mirror

James Gada, the medical doctor, loved his wife very much. Those who knew him said he worshipped the very ground she moved on. But Anna was not much of a wife. She always woke up late, spent most of the day out shopping or visiting friends and when she came back home late in the evening spent most of the time watching television or chatting with her friends over the cell phone.

She was pompous and loved to bask in the glow of the attention of people. If she met a celebrity or an important man in town she would always tell James that she had met so and so who had looked at her as if he had never seen a woman. At night, in bed, she would read him comments made on pictures that she had posted on the social media. And she would finish that by exclaiming, "See how lucky you are to have beautiful me!" Smitten by love, he took that as a compliment.

Although she was also very materialistic, James did his best to give her everything she wanted. Unfortunately there was no end to her wants. She wanted to go abroad for holidays, throw expensive parties, buy new clothes, the list was endless. James' salary could hardly support that and therefore he was always without money and deep in debt.

His efforts to make her see the folly of her wasteful lifestyle were brushed aside with reasons that made completely no sense. She needed the clothes so that she should look the perfect doctor's wife, she needed the parties so that she could link him up with important personalities in the city, a hardworking and successful doctor like him needed to compensate himself with a wonderful holiday outside the country. Her way of thinking made no sense at all to James but in the end he simply gave up trying.

He first met her when she came to live with her uncle, John Bango, who worked as a cook for a neighbouring businessman. Bango was a jolly chubby man of about fifty who loved to chat with James.

Bango came to introduce Anna a day after her arrival. "James, this is Anna, the niece I was saying is coming to stay with me." He turned to Anna. "Anna, this is James, a medical doctor and my good neighbour."

James failed to see the appraising glance of the tall girl as she looked him up and down with her big eyes, taking in his white Armani shirt, black Pierre Cardin trousers and pointed Gucci shoes which all bespoke of money. His wristwatch was an expensive golden Omega. Satisfaction spread on her face.

But what James saw was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Fashion had changed to body hugging dresses and the dress she wore did justice to her curvaceous figure with shapely pointed breasts and broad hips. Her black hair, parted in the middle, framed her heart shaped face.

From that moment James fell hopelessly in love with her beautiful face and figure. There was no room in his heart to judge her heart and character; he judged everything by her looks. To him, such a beautiful woman was flawless like a goddess.

He did not even propose love to her. She just took it that he had fallen in love with her and started behaving like his girlfriend. Sometimes she even came home to cook for his three brothers who were staying with him.

He did not delay or rather both did not delay. They dragged each other to the altar six months later. They were married with pomp at a glittering wedding. James had wanted a simple ceremony but Anna would not take it. You only marry once so why not make it a memorable event, she had pointed out. So James had to borrow money to pay for the wedding and this money had to be repaid from his salary.

The first thing she did when they returned from their honeymoon was to order him to send his brothers away.

“Are you the only person in your family?” she asked him when he objected.

“You know I’m not,” he replied, surprised. “Why should we send them away?”

“This is a new marriage; I want to stay freely here.”

“But this is a big house; they can even stay in the guest wing,” James reasoned.

“I didn’t say this is a small house,” she said fiercely. “Even if it had a hundred rooms, I would still insist you send them away; I want to roam the house as freely as a bird in the sky.”

“I don’t see why you cannot do that even with them in the house.”

“Naked? With them in the house?”

He tried to object. But her response was to get moody. They spent several days without talking to each other. He finally caved in.

A few weeks later she brought up a new demand, “I want you to stop going out to drink.”

“Why should I do that? I’m drinking beer no differently from the way I used to drink.”

“At that time you were not married,” she spat back. “If you still want to go on drinking then just buy the beer and drink it here at home.”

James realised that if he continued to bow down to her demands, there would be no stopping. He decided to put his foot down and assert his rights not only as a titular but real head of the family.

So against her express wishes, the following weekend he went out to drink with his friends at his favourite bar. He was lifting his bottle of beer when a voice cracked, “James!”

James’ hand froze in midair. Anna stood in the doorway of the bar in a glittering golden dress, her beautiful mass of black hair tied at the back with a ribbon. Then she waltzed in on pointed high heels.

“What do you think you’re doing in this filthy place?” she asked, arms akimbo.

Their eyes locked. James found something threatening in Anna’s big eyes. It was his eyes that gave ground. “I’m drinking beer with my friends,” he answered sheepishly, indicating the three men sitting with him at the table in the fully packed bar.

She ran her eyes over his friends as if they were trash. “You call this sorry looking bunch of clowns, friends? You,” she pointed at the oldest of them, “You’re supposed to be taking care of your grandchildren at home instead of wasting your time with these fools.” She moved on to the next man, a stocky man with a bushy beard. “You should be using the money you’re squandering on beer to pay the barber to shave your disgusting

beard.” Turning to the youngest member of the group, she said, “And you, instead of taking care of your drab young wife, here you’re, drinking yourself silly; you’ll have yourself to blame if the house boy begins to munch your goodies at home!”

James’ friends were shocked and gave him a look that said ‘are you going to tolerate this nonsense?’ But all he could do was croak, “Anna...”

She shut him up with a wave of her hand. “Don’t worry, I understand them. I’m willing to wager their wives are all museum pieces so no one can blame them for attempting to brighten their miserable lives by looking at the gaudy bar girls in here.”

The bar girls glared at her with open hostility but Anna paid no heed.

“Anna, please...”

“I said shut up; I’m not done talking! Look at me, take a good look at me,” she went on, smoothing the flanks of her hips. “I’ve got the figure and the looks,” she paused and swung around so that they were staring at her buxom backside. “Look at my bums,” she said shaking her buttocks which danced enthrallingly. “Ask if any of them have a wife with anything that can compete with that!”

“Anna...”

“You’ve got it all in me,” she cut him. “So, what are you looking for in here, ungrateful man?”

James’ mouth opened and closed like that of a fish out of water but no words came out.

“Have you suddenly gone mute? I asked you a question,” she snarled.

James tried to salvage his broken pride. “I...I just wanted to have a drink with my friends before going home.”

Anna grabbed the bottle from his hands and emptied its contents on the floor. “Then you’ve just finished your drink. Let’s go home.”

James’ zeal to go out drinking with his friends was snuffed out completely. From that day onwards, he would go straight home after knocking off from work only more often than not to find Anna still out. She would rush in and give this or that excuse, like, “Eish, there was a traffic jam,” or “Couldn’t decide what hairstyle to do so my hairdresser had to do my hair several times.”

Anna also refused to have children, saying it would spoil her figure. “We’ll have children later. Don’t you want people to envy you for having such a beautifully sculptured wife? You know people always wonder how a simple little man like you married a woman in the class of Mona Lisa!”

James, still blinded by the glare of her beauty, would be hurt but would sweep all this away hoping she would outgrow such fancies and settle down. “That’s exactly why I want a child; I want you to bear me another Mona Lisa.”

Such compliments would send her in an ecstasy. “Patience, James. You’ll have your Mona Lisa at the appropriate time.”

And that is how their life went for five years. Everything was about her. But there is always a limit to what one can put up with in a marriage. What broke the camel’s back was the visit of James’ mother who arrived while Anna had gone to a hair salon.

Anna came back late in the afternoon in her sporty red BMW. She stepped out of the car and sashayed towards the house singing a tune heartily to herself. It had just stopped raining and the cool breeze was freshening after the day's heat.

"Honey, I'm back," she purred as she swept into the lounge. "Look at my hair, don't you think..." She broke off when she saw that James was not alone in the living room. "I didn't..." she said as she took in his mother sitting on a sofa watching TV. Without another word she proceeded to the bedroom.

With a sigh, James followed her into the bedroom. "What was the meaning of that?"

"The meaning of what?" she shot back.

"Why didn't you greet my mother?"

"What does she want?"

"You didn't answer my question," he insisted.

"I'll not answer your stupid question until you tell me what she's doing here," she replied with marked insolence.

"Anna, what have you got against my mother that you do not even want to see her?"

"You want to know? You want to know? It's because every time she comes here I know she's looking for something," she explained contemptuously. "Like this time, what does she want?"

James lowered his voice. "She wants some money to buy fertiliser."

"And what have you told her?" she asked viciously.

"She arrived this morning after you'd left for the salon," James explained irrelevantly. "I told her I'll give her the answer after I've discussed her request with you."

"Well, the request has been discussed," she spat. "The answer is no."

"Darling..."

"Don't darling me; I said we're not going to give her anything!" she shouted.

"Look, dear. She isn't looking for much. Just six bags," James pointed out. "It's something we can easily afford."

Anna raised her hand. "It's not a question of whether we can afford it or not. It's the principle. Our money is for this family. And this family means you and me."

"I understand that," James said placatingly. "But..."

"No buts, James. Your mother should learn to take care of herself. Our responsibility is to ourselves and not our parents."

"I know your views on this subject. But as I've said countless times my mother could not save anything because she spent all her money towards my education."

Anna glared at him. "Are you trying to say she sent you to school as an investment?"

"No..."

"Or are you trying to say I waste your money?"

"No..."

"I don't need to remind you that there were a lot of men out there who could've taken proper care of me but I chose you because I believed you'll make it great in life and take really good care of beautiful me," she flared. "Don't disappoint me."

"I understand, but..."

“Then this discussion is over. Don’t forget we pledged to give towards that church building project. On top of that I’ve to go to the UK for shopping. We also need to save money for our holiday at Victoria Falls.”

James took a deep breath. He wished to scream that they could afford all they had because his mother had sacrificed all she had to send him to school. Without her sacrifice, she could not be talking of going shopping to the UK let alone wasting money on a useless vacation in Zambia.

But he did not say anything. Wish as he could, he could not gather enough strength to go against Anna’s wishes. All he could say was, “Ok. We’ll not give her anything. But at least you should’ve greeted her.”

She laughed harshly. “You don’t throw bones at dogs you don’t want around your house, do you?”

James closed the bedroom door and went back into the sitting room. He looked at the lavishly furnished lounge and was filled with guilt. How was he going to tell his mother they could not afford to give her money to buy six bags of fertilisers when they could manage to buy every conceivable modern convenience for their house?

It was on that day that thoughts of leaving Anna crept into his mind. Several months later, he fell in love with Lignet. She was a simple young woman who lived in the slums. Whenever he wanted to meet her, he would lie to Anna that he was going to a meeting. And in this way Anna never found out.

Now he had made up his mind that he would divorce Anna and marry Lignet. He had told Anna that he was going to a meeting in Blantyre. But it was all a lie. He was going to make a marriage proposal to Lignet after which he would approach Anna with his decision for a divorce.

Yet as he packed his things that Friday morning, he still desperately wished Anna would do something that would change his mind. Anything, just a small gesture that showed she loved him, cared about him. If she did that, he was prepared to forgive her everything and start a new life.

But Anna, sitting on the dressing table only in panties and brassiere, had time only for her reflection in the mirror. The figure that stared back at her satisfied her. James would soon be off to Blantyre and she would be free to go shopping.

“Magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of all,” she sang while slipping into a body clasp dress. For a moment she surveyed herself in the mirror and then turned to James. “How do I look, honey?”

James glanced at her. “Gorgeous,” he said mechanically and resumed his packing. In the past it gave him satisfaction to watch her dress, but now that pleasure was gone. “I can’t find my blue shirt.”

“Check in the wardrobe or chest of drawers,” she replied impatiently and picked two necklaces. “Which of these should I put on?”

“The golden one should match your dress,” he replied going through the wardrobe. “Still can’t find the shirt. Never mind. The clothes I’ve taken will do.”

She did not answer as she was so engrossed with trying the effect of the golden

necklace on her dress. She decided it did not match and settled on the silver one.

“Honey, I’ll be leaving,” James said, then he hesitated, hoping she would hug him or blow him a kiss but she was busy opening her powder case. “See you Sunday evening.”

“Before you leave, please quickly iron that handkerchief for me,” she said powdering her face.

James glanced at her, but her focus was on her face in the mirror. He ironed the handkerchief, blew her a kiss which she did not even acknowledge and was gone.

For a full minute she gyrated before the mirror like a ballet dancer, enjoying what she saw in the mirror. Then she went into the dining room, ate the breakfast the maid had prepared and left for the city centre. The day went fast. It was late in the afternoon when she returned. She was surprised to find Sonia, her best friend waiting for her in a basket chair on the verandah.

They chatted about nothing in particular but it was clear by her looks that Sonia was impatient to tell her something.

“Where’s James?” Sonia asked suddenly.

“Has gone to Blantyre on his usual business trips,” she answered.

Sonia looked at her strangely. “Doesn’t it seem odd to you that he goes on these trips on Fridays?”

Anna laughed. “Why should I care? I love it when he goes away; it gives me freedom to do what I want.”

“Get serious, Anna; don’t you think these trips are one too many?” Sonia persisted. “And why are they always made towards the weekend?”

“I hadn’t thought of it. But now that you mention it, it’s something I should’ve thought about,” Anna agreed.

Sonia lowered her voice. “I hate to tell you this, Anna but you’re my best friend. James has a girlfriend. Whenever he goes to see her, he lies to you that he’s gone to Blantyre.”

Anna refused to acknowledge the accusation. “Impossible. There’s no way James can cheat on me. He adores me, Sonia.”

“Wake up, Anna. That’s how all men are. They’re cheats, liars,” Sonia said maliciously. “Your mistake was to think that James loved you with his heart. Maybe he did on your wedding day but certainly not after that.”

Anna felt betrayed. How could James do this to her? She had sacrificed her ambitions and supported him through her social contacts to rise at the hospital. Now that he was a medical director, he wanted to abandon her for some cheap husband grabbing woman. How could he be so selfish?

She had been born and bred in the village. She had always dreamed of exclusive clothes, dazzling parties and every imaginable up-to-the minute luxury and at an early age had made up her mind that she would only marry a husband who could provide what she wanted. When her uncle had told her about James, she had seen a way of achieving her dream. And just when she had thought she had it all, another woman was about to grab it away from her. There was no way she could accept that.

“How can James dare cheat on me?” she flared, “There were many suitors looking for

my hand in marriage. Instead of being grateful that I accepted to be his wife he repays me by cheating on me. That's unfair!"

She got up and made several poses as if she was on a photo shoot out. "I've got the appearance, class and style; what else is that fool looking for?"

Sonia shrugged for an answer.

Frustrated that she did not get a direct answer, she gripped Sonia by the shoulders. "How do I look?" she demanded, shaking her.

"Super," Sonia answered.

A smile spread on Anna's face. "Magic mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of all?" she sang.

"You, your majesty," replied Sonia. She knew this was Anna's favourite song from the old folk tale. Like the vain queen, she loved to be told how beautiful she was.

"I want to meet this other woman," she said suddenly. "When James sees me and compares me with the other woman, the cheating fool will realise that he is damn fool to lose me!"

"When should we go?"

"Today. Now."

They took Sonia's car. The road was so bad that they had to drive at a snail's pace. As the car squeezed its way through the alleys of the location, Anna was astounded by the ugliness of the slum. The houses were tiny crumbling structures made of every type of discarded material. Garbage was strewn everywhere and flies flew about like angry bees. What was her husband looking for in the rubbish dump?

"We'll walk from here," Sonia said, stopping the car somewhere inside the slum. "I don't want him seeing us and bolting away."

The two women got out and picked their way along the gaps between the shacks, doing their best to ignore the heavy stench of rotting refuse that hung in the air like mist.

They turned into another alley and saw James car parked outside a small tumbledown house of unbaked bricks. Anna gaped! James and Lignet sat on stools near a fire outside the house. They were chatting and laughing heartily as they roasted dry maize in a frying pan. Lignet would take some of the popcorn and playfully stick it into James' mouth.

They looked much like teenagers in love, oblivious of their squalid surroundings. After that they went to sit down on a mat. Lignet started to cut James' fingernails.

Anger welled in Anna. She charged forward. "James, what're you doing here?"

But if she had thought he would be alarmed, she was disappointed. He simply got up and faced her. "What do you think I'm doing?"

The question jarred her badly. "I catch you with a woman and you've the effrontery to ask me that stupid question?"

James gave her a measured look. "What do you care?"

"What do I care? I'm your wife!"

James let out a ghastly laugh. "I don't think you know the meaning of the word wife. You married me only as a set up so that you could get what you wanted."

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "And what was that?"

“Money and the good things that go with it. To you marriage was merely a device to get a life of luxury,” James said.

She knew James was right. She had not been much of a wife to him. She had only cared about the soft life that being his wife brought her. James had loved her with his heart. She had taken advantage of that and never returned his love.

She now faced to the dangerous fact that she could lose it all now. Loosing James meant losing everything-the money and social standing that went with being his wife. She would not only loose the soft living and luxury but even herself. Without James she would be just like any other woman. Her uncle had gone back to the village and that meant her also returning to the low-down village where she had escaped from over five years ago.

The idea filled her with a mixture of fear and boiling rage. She looked around for support, but saw none. A fry perched on Sonia’s head sharpened its legs like scissors as if it was readying for an attack. Mosquitoes droned with infuriating monotony. Crows cawed menacingly. It seems everything was ranged against her. She failed to fight down her anger.

“Look at me, James, look at me carefully,” she barked. “I’m the right woman for you, beautiful and intelligent, not that wretched creature!”

“Oh, vain queen, the wretched girls will end up being married and maintaining their marriages, but what about you?” James answered. “Go and consult your magic mirror again, Anna. It may tell you who is really fair between you and her.”

“I’ll deal with that flotsam the way the queen dealt with Snow White,” she roared.

James shook his head. “Read the tale again, vain queen. It wasn’t the queen but Snow White who lived happily ever after.”

This stabbed at her and made her more furious. “There’s no way that garbage can compete with me. You can’t afford to lose this,” she said jutting out her breasts. Then she shook her bounteous bum. “Or this. You can only find them with me.”

James shook his head. “There’s more to beauty than mere looks, Anna.”

“Oh, is there? Is there?” she shrieked. “But there’s no way that piece of trash can compete with me.”

“There’ll be no competition Anna. I’m filing for a divorce.”

The words fell on her like a ton of bricks. With surprising clarity, it dawned on her that she had really lost James. She tried to find the words that would save her marriage but realised that no matter what she said James would not change his mind.

“James, you want to leave me so that you can marry this cheap slum girl?” she asked plaintively.

“Lignet’s a slum girl but not cheap. She has something you’ll never have-quality and a heart.” Lignet moved beside him. “But since you have asked; yes, I’m marrying her.”



The Slay Queen

She was more or less a celebrity. Every day she posted her pictures on Facebook. She was always on WhatsApp. Her Instagram account had thousands of followers. She had reached that social standing where one wears certain clothes, dines at certain restaurants, drives certain cars, and moves in certain circles; in other words, she was a woman of high status.

Her real name had vanished long ago amongst the many aliases she used on the social media. But the nom de plume that had stuck was Slay Queen. To a lesser extent she was also known as the Diva. These names could lead one into thinking that she was an actor, singer or some sort of an entertainer. She was none of these. She had given herself these monikers because she considered herself the most beautiful and best dressed woman on the social circuit.

One could find out what she was doing every hour by simply checking her posts on her WhatsApp or Facebook account. She uploaded a photo of every new garb she donned, every hair style she wore or even any finger nails she stuck on. She would even take pictures of food before she ate it, these mainly being of takeaways bought at KFC, Steers and other similar chic restaurants. It was amazing that she restrained herself from taking photos of her poop and posting them on the social media.

That day the Slay Queen arrived at the shopping mall in a glimmering Volkswagen. Although the morning was beautiful, she beat its splendour by far. Tufts of white clouds smudged the blue of the sky while there was no blemish on her soft smooth skin.

Easing the car into the parking lot of the mall, she turned off the engine. She opened the tote bag lying on the passenger seat and took out her makeup kit. Preening herself in the mirror, she powdered her face, touched her lips with lipstick, arranged her hair, and slipped on her pink sunglasses. Satisfied, she took a picture with her sleek Samsung tablet and uploaded it on her Facebook page. At City Shopping Mall, ran the caption.

An almost thin, tall, straight backed woman of twenty-five with a well-rounded trim backside, she cut an exotic figure as she stepped out of the car. Her floral off-the-shoulder top complemented her leaf print skin-tight mini-skirt. The gold tone high heels she wore were of the same colour as her three-inch red synthetic fingernails. She looked as expensive as she looked beautiful.

But nothing about her was real. The Ralph Lauren blouse, an imitation, was borrowed from Juanita. The skirt, a counterfeit Donna Karan, belonged to Lidia. The high heels, which carried a Dolce and Gabana label as did the tote bag, were both copies and borrowed from Flora. Her bangles and golden earrings were borrowed from her sister Leona.

Further, even her looks were fake. Those that knew her, remembered that she had been a dark-complexioned woman. Now she was very light in complexion with a soft and smooth skin like a baby's, thanks to skin lightening creams. Her eyelashes were as artificial as her fingernails. The beauty she was so proud of was a product of rouge and mascara. Even the pictures she posted on the social media were photoshopped to enhance her beauty. She had borrowed the VW she was using from her brother.

She did not stop there. She posted pictures with fake backgrounds to give people an

impression that she had been to glamorous places. There were pictures showing her in an aeroplane although she had never been in one. She pretended she were friends with Vivica Fox, Oprah Winfrey and other world class celebrities. The closest she had been to Naomi Campbell was in the fashion magazines but she fibbed that she chatted with her about modelling on WhatsApp.

The Diva glided into the supermarket, swinging her hips, her bums doing some sort of a dance. The mini-skirt she wore attracted attention. But that is what she loved most—the attention of men. Her whole life revolved around men. She needed them to support the life she had got accustomed to. In fact she had created her upscale image in order to attract men with money. She appeared in public in borrowed designer clothes, she only patronised luxurious night clubs and restaurants and drove borrowed or hired posh cars.

She resided in a tiny servant's quarter in Area 9 but feigned that she lived with her mother in a mansion in that prosperous suburb. She had not gone further than Form Two but lied that she had attended prestigious private schools and obtained a degree in the United Kingdom. Through and through, her life was all a charade. Her lifestyle was sustained by begging, borrowing and the occasional boyfriend who gave her some money. But she looked at all this as investment. Her hope was that one day this would trap a rich man with whom she would walk down the aisle.

She was not in the supermarket to buy things. It was just one of her ways of trying her luck. You never know where you will meet Mr Right, she always told her friends. Pretending that she had not found what she was looking for, she waltzed out of the supermarket like a super model. At the door, a young man accosted her.

“Hi Jane!” the man greeted her.

The Slay Queen was about to dismiss him with the rudeness she reserved for men whom she considered of an inferior class when something about him stopped her. This was not just any young man. She shed off her sunglasses in disbelief.

The man's slim fit shirt was a genuine Giorgio Armani. The label on his striped trousers was Pierre Cardin, also genuine. His Gucci shoes were also of genuine material. Stunned, she failed to catch the significance of the fact that he wore his Cartier the wrong way. In his right hand dangled car keys with a BMW tag.

This was the type of man she was always telling her friends she wanted for a husband. Not just a man with money but one made of money. Her mind snapped to a decision. She was going to get this man at any cost.

“Nope, ahm not Jane,” she replied at length in her peculiar English, flashing him a smile.

“Well, you look so much alike,” he said. “Only you're more beautiful.”

The Slay Queen raised her arm to display her glittering fingernails and golden bracelet. “Wait, wait, Jane's youah old lost gal friend from youah school days? Raht?”

“No, just an old friend,” he answered taking off his sunglasses. “Since you're not Jane, may I've the pleasure of knowing you?”

“Slay is mah handle,” she replied. “And yah ah?”

“Robert Khaki, owner and CEO of Investments RJ. You can call me Bob.”

The Diva cast a sidelong glance at Robert's face. He was not exactly handsome but she was one of those women who judged a man's worth by his pockets and not his looks. Sturdily built and of medium height, she guessed his age to be around thirty. "Well, that's impressive; owning a company at such a young age. Youah other half must be proud of yah, Mr Khaki..."

"I've been unlucky in my hunt for a wife," he interrupted her "But this looks like my lucky day."

"Lak seriously?" purred the Diva. "Seh yah are joking! Raht?"

"It's no joke, Slay."

The Slay Queen could not believe her ears. Not only was the loaded young man single but he was also making it clear he found her attractive. God had finally answered her prayers. She had to do her best to avoid making the sign of the cross.

Robert glanced at his stylish time piece. "Slay, I've delayed you. Let me drop you wherever you're going."

She dug out her car keys from her handbag. "Ahm driving but thanks for the offer, Bob."

He eyed her from head to toe, taking in her lavish attire. "My apologies; should've guessed. Then let me walk you to your car."

They walked side by side to the parking lot. Accompanied by the dashing young man, the Slay Queen now noted what a picturesque day it was. In the sky, the tassels of clouds were now gone and replaced by flying birds. The gentle wind slightly ruffled her hair.

"This is mah car," she said pointing at the Volkswagen.

He ran his hands over the gleaming body of the car. "It's gorgeous, but its beauty pales by far with yours." He turned to a magnificent red BMW parked by the car. "Even my car here is nothing compared to your beauty."

The Slay Queen's eyes widened. "Hold on, hold on, Bob," she purred raising her hand, fingers spread. "This is youah machine?"

"The one I use during weekends," he said casually. "During weekdays I prefer a Mercedes Benz"

The Diva's heart was beating wildly. Her friends would die of envy when she told them of the wonderful young man she had found.

"Slay, can I take you out to dinner this evening?" he asked.

Exultation filled the Slay Queen. She had been worried he would not take her contact details. Hot guys like him were every girl's target.

"Lemme see, lemme see," she feigned to consider the request. "Yep, mah evening is open."

"Can we meet at a restaurant of your choice, say at seven?" he suggested.

"Sharp. The Imperial Restaurant is mah favourite," she said mentioning the most expensive eating house in the city to impress Robert. "But mah brother wanna borrow mah car this evening. So yah come and pick me up at mah place," she said remembering that she would have to give the car back to her brother. She gave him her address and

phone number. “Just buzz me when yah are at the gate and ah will pop out. Mother is very strict, Bob. Raht?”

After parting with Robert, the Diva visited several friends and borrowed the necessary get up for her date. When Robert came to pick her up she was in a sleeveless fit and flare shimmering red evening dress with sequins and exuding Avon perfume. She saw a satisfied look on his face.

Robert seemed suddenly to have remembered something. “Eish, I’ve forgotten my ATM card and I let the houseboy go see a sick friend and won’t be back till eight.”

The Slay Queen could not let such a small thing spoil her evening out. “Nah worry youahself. Ah’ve some dosh, rav,” she said, trilling the ‘r’ in love to sound ‘r’.

“Thanks, dear. I’ll give you back the money later.”

“Nah need, sweet bwai.” she said and winked conspiratorially at him. “Just prepare for a hefty bill next time. Raht?”

“Right,” agreed Robert.

At the imposing Imperial Restaurant, an immaculately dressed waiter conducted them to a table. The Diva had never been in the restaurant. When the waiter brought the menu and she saw the price list, the Slay Queen nearly fainted with shock. But she reminded herself that this was the price she had to pay to win Robert’s heart.

A sumptuous dinner and three glasses of wine into the date, they had fallen in love. She was soon endowing endearments lavishly—Robert was now babes, honey, sugar, baby doll and any sweet name she could think of. Glitzy pictures of their evening together flooded the social media. The Slay Queen was on the roll, no question about that. She left the restaurant with an empty purse but a satisfied heart. Next time it would be her turn to empty Robert’s wallet.

But there was no next time. Robert seemed to perpetually forget his wallet, his ATM card, his cheque book and the Slay Queen ended up footing all the bills.

Being showy, the Slay Queen wanted all her friends to know about her new boyfriend. Not just on the social media but in person. So two weeks later she organised a party at Robert’s house where she invited all her friends. She paid for everything for Robert had said he had no money because he had just ordered some goods from China.

Her friends came in droves, a bevy of girls accompanied by their boyfriends. They all wanted to see the much touted Mr Right. They were all dressed to kill. But both the Slay Queen and Robert, dressed to dazzle, outshone them all. The Diva was in an embroidered bell-sleeve lace blouse and super skinny jean. Robert sported a white shirt and trousers that fitted him perfectly.

The party was held in Robert’s big airy lounge. A hired top DJ spun the music as a photographer caught the event on camera. The blast was in full swing when the taxi pulled up outside the house. No one took any notice of the sharply dressed man who got out of the cab and let himself into the house. It was only when the man turned off the massive stereo that everyone became aware of his unwelcome presence in the big room.

“Uh do yah think yah are to come and disturb mah pahre?” the Slay Queen asked

angrily, a glass of wine in her hand.

The man looked at her with distaste. "And who are you?"

"Ahm Slay Queen, Robert's babe and soon to be the mistress of this house," the Diva announced proudly emptying her glass. She turned to Robert. "Rav, who's this idiot?"

The man smiled at Robert. He was of the same height and build as Robert. "Tell her who I'm, Robert." The name Robert was pronounced with an inflection.

The mouth of the man who called himself Robert opened and closed like that of a choking person, shame written all over his face, his body quaking with fear.

"He...he's Mr Khaki, my boss," he answered weakly. "This is his house."

The wine glass fell from the Slay Queen's hands and shattered on the tiled floor. "Hold on, hold on, rav! Lak seriously, whah ah yah yapping about?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"I'm sorry, Slay. I lied to you. I don't own a company. I'm not a CEO. My name is not even Robert. I'm Finiyasi, Mr Khaki's houseboy."

There were several stifled giggles. Phone cameras flashed. But the Diva, blinded and deafened by anger, neither saw nor heard anything. "Hang on, hang on! Whah do yah mean yah are Mr Khaki's housebwai?" she screamed.

"I work for Mr Khaki as a domestic servant," the houseboy explained, kneeling before the Slay Queen, his hands clasped together as if in prayer. "Ever since I saw your picture on Facebook a year ago, I hopelessly fell in love with you. However, I knew a celebrity like you would not accept to marry a houseboy like me." He halted briefly and looked at Mr Khaki. "So when Mr Khaki went for a month long business trip to the UK I saw my opportunity. I immediately assumed his persona." His eyes lost focus and he continued dreamily. "I was no longer Finiyasi the houseboy but Robert Khaki, owner and CEO of Investments RJ. I moved from the servants' quarters into the main house, slept in his bed, wore his clothes and drove his BMW and the rest happened as you know it." He paused again and looked at the Diva but avoided her eyes. "I did all this because I love you, Slay."

The Slay Queen was thoughtful. "Our meeting at the shopping mall?" she wanted to know.

"I planned that. I knew of your movements from your posts on Facebook," replied the houseboy.

She should have known, she accused herself. The man was always without money, always giving this or that excuse. Then she remembered the wrist watch he had worn the wrong way. The houseboy could not even read the time. Gad, that alone should have opened her eyes!

"I'd to cut my business trip short when somebody told me the mayhem this cheating houseboy was causing in my house," Mr Khaki cut through her thoughts. "This party is over. Finiyasi, take your whore and leave my house now. You're fired!"

Mastering the little dignity that was left in her, the Diva said, "Ahm not a prostitute. He fooled me. Ah thought he owned this house."

"I know your kind, Slay Queen or whatever you call yourself," Mr Khaki said sarcastically. "You're one of those low class girls who masquerade as divas. Your class

never changes because of that. Blinded by ambition, in the end you are fooled by con artists in borrowed robes into thinking they're what they're not. By the time you realise they're nothing it's always too late. Now get out, all of you!"

This is a nightmare, thought the Diva as she scampered out of the house together with her friends. The wretched houseboy crumpled on the floor had put paid to her carefully cultivated character as a socialite. Her mask was off. She could hear peoples deriding laughter as they gossiped all over Facebook and WhatsApp at how she, a super Diva, had been fooled by a houseboy.



The Woman who was Someone Else

Swarms of cackling crows spoiled the beauty of the cloudless blue sky. However, this monstrosity was softened by the birds and butterflies playing in the flowering shrubs planted along the street. Scents of flowers blown by the morning draught filled the gleaming blue Audi cruising leisurely in the road toward the city center.

At the wheel of the Audi, Ganda Phiri, the fabled philanderer, completely ignored the winged scavengers. “A lovely day for beautiful catch,” he said to himself glancing at a pair of brightly coloured birds doing a courtship dance in a tree. “That’s the way to go, birdie! Soon it will be my turn to find myself a beautiful muchacha.”

As if in response, he spotted her among the people crowding the bus stage at Kanengo. A school girl, the files she clasped in her hands told him. Hitting the brakes, Ganda brought the car to a halt at the bus stop. He waved back the people scrambling towards the car and beckoned the girl to come.

She hesitated then moved towards the car with steps like those of a model on catwalk. Ganda’s eyes widened, his mouth opening. If he thought he had seen beautiful girls, he realised that he had been cheating himself. Of medium height and very light in complexion, she had pointed breasts, a very narrow waist and amazingly wide hips. Her black hair was parted in the middle and the two plaits were clasped on either side of her face. The white blouse and blue skirt clinging to her body sharply defined her beguiling figure. He guessed her age to be slightly under twenty.

As she reached the car, he bent across the passenger seat and opened the door for her. She got in. Outdone, the scent of flowers escaped from the car through the open windows and was replaced by the subtle perfume she wore. As if to trap the perfume inside, Ganda rolled up the windows. He took off slowly, a prisoner of the beautiful passenger sitting beside him.

“Thank you for the lift,” she purred smiling brightly at him.

He felt his heart quicken. What was the matter with him? Why was he acting like a teenager with a crush? Although he was not married, he was past forty and she was not the first girl he had ever given a lift to.

“May I’ve the pleasure of knowing my passenger?” Ganda asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

She turned slightly to look at him. One of her shirt buttons was unbuttoned giving him a good gander of her breasts. “I’m Fiona Gwede.”

“Fiona. Fiona,” he said as if tasting the name. “That’s a beautiful name. Mine is Ganda, Ganda Phiri. Where are you headed?”

She looked at him and gave him a smile that showed glittering white teeth. “To school. Lilongwe Business College.”

“That’s a prestigious school,” he said more to impress her than the truth. “What course are you doing?”

“Mmm...business,” she replied and said suddenly. “You’ve a beautiful car.”

Glancing covertly at her, Ganda noted that she wore no makeup at all. “But not as beautiful as you.”

“Don’t flatter me, Mr. Phiri,” she giggled. “How about your wife?”

“I’m not yet married...”

“Then what about your girlfriend, Mr. Phiri?” she asked, looking at him from under her eye lashes.

Ganda’s heart somersaulted again. Fiona attracted him like a magnet and this disturbed him. At forty-five and a Casanova, he thought he was past being stunned by beautiful women. But here he was acting like a schoolboy with a crush on his female teacher.

“I’m Ganda to all my friends,” he told her. “As for a girlfriend, I’m still looking for one,” he paused and looked at her with open admiration. “I think I’ve found one.”

They talked as they drove. Ganda did not bother to hide that she had bowled him over. The girl herself showed a strong interest in him. As they neared the college, he asked for her cellphone number.

“I don’t have a cellphone,” she laughed, biting her fingertips. “But you can get me on my aunt’s number any time you would like to talk to me.”

Ganda glanced at her with feigned astonishment. “Hey, in this age a girl like you can’t afford not to have a cellphone. Tomorrow let’s meet at City Electronics at twelve sharp.”

The college came into sight and Ganda stopped the car. Fiona slid out, blew him a kiss and walked away swinging her hips. Ganda’s eyes followed her, feasting on her ample behind, which moved as if it had a life of its own. He swallowed with desire.

Ganda had no other interests in life apart from young girls. He would usually drive around town and when he saw a girl going to school, he would offer her a lift just as he had done with Fiona. The end result would invariably be the girl being added at the bottom of his long list of girlfriends. He told himself he was going to make sure that this gorgeous girl became his girlfriend at any cost.

At noon the next day they met at the City Electronics. Fiona was in a simple white dress that perfectly sculptured her curvaceous body. Ganda took a deep breath to calm his racing heart. They went together into the shop.

She chose a sleek looking mobile phone, kissed it and turned to Ganda. “Darling, I want this phone.”

The endearing word made Ganda’s heart soar with pride. None the less he had to do his best to hide his shock when he saw the cell phone’s price. The cost was exactly equivalent to half his monthly salary. He made a mental note that if this was an example of Fiona’s tastes, he should stop seeing her immediately after getting her into bed.

But for fear of disappointing the girl, who looked at him like a child begging for a toy of her dreams, he took out his cheque book, tore a leaf, filled in the amount with a slightly trembling hand, signed it and gave it to her. Fiona kissed it and tossed it carelessly at the shopkeeper.

They talked on the phone daily that week. He proposed love to her and she agreed. But his suggestion that they meet at a motel the following weekend was met with an unequivocal no. Fiona told him in no uncertain terms that she was a born again Christian and if he wanted to meet her it would have to be at the house where she lived with her aunt. She gave him the directions he had to follow to get to the house. “I want

it all very respectable,” she told him. “Aunt Belinda has sworn to kill me if I ever get into an improper relationship.”

As he drove to her house that Saturday afternoon, Ganda was disturbed that he had actually agreed to see Fiona at her house. He considered himself the predator and the girl his prey. It was the girl who was supposed to do his bidding but it was the opposite that was happening. He quickly pushed the thought out of his mind. He had a girl to get into bed.

Locating her house proved an easy thing. It was in a cluster of houses that had been built in lines by the City Council. He parked his car by the house, got out and stretched with sensual anticipation. At the door, he knocked and waited. When there was no response to his third knock he began to wonder whether he had gone to the right house or not. He killed the time by glancing at three girls giggling at the verandah of a nearby house who he knew were blathering something about him.

Then he heard footfalls and the door clicked open. In the doorway stood Fiona wrapped in a bathing towel, her hair flowing freely to her bare shoulders. “Come in, Ganda,” she gushed, standing to one side, her white teeth glinting in the afternoon sun. “I was taking a bath.”

He followed her into the house. The sitting room was sparsely furnished. Three arm chairs stood around a coffee table and there was a small television screen on a table in one corner.

“Come on in into my bedroom,” she said leading the way. “Aunt is away and won’t be back until late in the evening.”

The bedroom was small with a single bed, a chair and a dressing table which was littered with cosmetics. Once in the bedroom, she unwrapped the bath towel and let it fall on the floor. Ganda gasped, his eyes widening, his mouth freezing open like that of a dead fish. Fiona was not wearing any under wear!

A physical craving like he never had gripped him. Clothes were an impediment and he cast them off as if they were on fire. He pulled her to the bed, his lips hungrily finding hers. She responded eagerly and they rolled on the bed, their hands moving over each other’s body. Suddenly, she disentangled herself, her face clouding with worry.

“What’s the matter, honey?” he asked with concern, his heart thumping wildly.

“I think I should be worrying about my education instead of doing this,” she said in a low voice, her hands covering her jutting breasts like a little girl.

Ganda’s mouth turned dry with desire. “What’s the problem?” he croaked, sliding his arms around her consolingly. “I already told you I want you to finish your diploma course.”

“Yes, I know that but I’m afraid I may have to drop out of school,” she explained, resting her head on his shoulder. “My aunt says she can’t afford to pay for my examination fees.”

He was silent for a moment. “What does your aunt do for a living?”

She rose and sat on his lap, facing him. “Runs small businesses. Unfortunately they are not doing well at the moment.”

“I don’t think that’s a problem,” he said taking her face in his arms. “I will pay the

fees for you.”

She still looked worried. “Thanks for the offer, darling. But it will still not work. Where will I get the money for text books, transport and so on?”

“Honey, I will look after all your needs,” Ganda said, impatiently pulling her to him. “A beautiful girl like you need not concern herself with small matters like money.”

She moved so that her body was perfectly moulded into his and looked at him with tears of appreciation in her eyes. “If you’re going to do that then I’ll have to tell my aunt about you otherwise she’ll wonder where I’m getting the money. I want it respectable, darling.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said that-I mean the respectable thing,” Ganda said with a laugh.

Her face was serious. “It’s because I’m serious about that, sweetheart.”

Ganda laughed again. “That’s fine with me, honey. You can tell her.”

“Serious? You’re my first boyfriend, Ganda. I and my aunt are a born-again Christians so only a formal relationship is acceptable to us.”

“Just come into my arms, darling; I’ll take care of all your problems,” he said hoarsely.

Her arms reached out and pushed him face up on the bed. Passion engulfed him as her hands worked his desire to a bursting point and there was only Fiona in the world.

Aunt Belinda came earlier than expected. A short, plump middle-aged woman, she found Ganda and Fiona chatting like love birds in the sitting room. She was a talkative woman, full of humour and made Ganda feel at home. She insisted that he stay for dinner which Ganda accepted.

Later, driving home, Ganda’s mind was on his lovemaking with Fiona. She had played mind-blowing erotic melodies on his body that had sent him into a sexy dreamland. Out of the numerous school girls he had for girl friends she was the real catch. Not only was she a beauty but she was also a lioness between the sheets. He decided that he was going to give her everything she needed so that she remained his girlfriend.

But much as he desired her, Ganda was not prepared for what followed. Fiona exploded into his life like a bomb. While he had controlled all the other girls, he was unable to control Fiona. She just had to curl her little finger and he would come running like a dog.

He did not know what was happening to him. What was with Fiona that made her so special to him? Was it love? All his other girlfriends faded into nothing. He was oblivious not only to her incessant demands for money and presents but to her aunt’s as well. Apart from paying rent for her Aunt’s house, he was also giving Aunt Belinda money to boost her businesses.

Frank, who was his workmate and best friend, warned him about Fiona. “Ganda, drop that girl. You’ll come to a bad end if you continue your relationship with her.”

“We love each other,” Ganda responded. “I’m even thinking of marrying her.”

Frank was appalled. “Ganda, what’s wrong with you? Can’t you see she is using you as her ATM card? I’m even amazed at how you are managing to meet her nonstop demands on your salary!”

“You always complained about my numerous girlfriends,” Ganda said. “Now I have shed off all the rest, why are you are still whining?”

“Unfortunately you have offloaded the better ones and left yourself with this tiger. She will eat you alive.”

Ganda smiled inwardly at the analogy. Frank was right. Fiona was indeed a tiger but not in the predatory sense-only in bed.

“Don’t worry Frank, I’ve got this. I’ve been in relationships with all kind of girls. I know what I’m doing,” Ganda said confidently.

“If I were you I’d drop Fiona like a hot ember,” Frank insisted. “She’ll bring you nothing but grief.”

Engulfed by the passion of love, Ganda was past listening to reason. Fiona was the embodiment of the perfect woman. He believed he was her first boyfriend and that she was a born-again Christian.

His trust in her was bolstered by the fact Fiona never accepted to go out to clubs to have fun. The only places she accepted to go with him was where no alcoholic drinks were sold. She even tried to persuade him to receive Jesus as his saviour. But he declined this offer because he loved drinking beer.

One afternoon Fiona arrived unannounced at his office, a vision of beauty clad in a made-to-measure red suit. His heartbeat quickened, something that always happened when she was in his presence.

She kissed him on the cheek, hopped on his desk and sat facing him, her legs slightly parted. “Honey, I would like you to do me a favour.”

Sitting in the swivel chair, Ganda could even see her lingerie through the parted legs. The sight drew all his attention that he did not hear what she was saying and she had to repeat herself.

“Sweetheart, Aunt Belinda is planning to open a boutique in City Centre and I’d like you to help her with the capital.”

Instead of answering, Ganda kept staring at Fiona like an idiot, his mind conjuring sexual acts with her.

She jumped off the desk. “You’re not listening, Ganda,” she paused and lifted her skirt. “This is all yours when you knock off, love. For now, listen.”

Ganda moistened his lips and swallowed with desire, ears roaring, his heart pounding. “You were saying?”

“My aunt would like to open a boutique and I want you to assist her with 5 million kwacha to kickstart the business,” she said getting back on the desk.

Ganda’s heart sank. There was no way he could raise that kind of money from his salary. “Honey, five million is a huge sum of money; I can’t manage to find that kind of money.”

Her face crumpled like that of a child, her eyes glistened and a tear fell from one eye. A sob escaped her. Ganda got up and put his arms consolingly on her shoulders. “I would like to help, darling, but I don’t have that kind of money.”

She pushed him away. When she spoke, her voice was aloof. “I was mistaken to think

you loved me...”

“I love you, Fiona,” Ganda butted in desperately.

“A man who loves a woman will do anything to make the woman happy,” she cried. “But I can see you do not love me...”

“Fiona...”

She cut him with a wave of her hand. “How can you say you love me when you cannot grant me this small wish of mine?”

Small wish? Ganda looked like a sinking man.

“I loved you with my whole heart but now I can clearly see that my love was misplaced,” she said jumping off the desk. When she glanced at him, her eyes were full of regret. “Have a good day.”

The fear of losing her stabbed at Ganda like a knife. “Fiona, please,” he begged. “I will find the money. It will be hard but I will try to find the money.”

She stared at him, her face hard, her eyes cold. “Is that a promise?”

“Yes, honey,” he responded hastily. “Just give me a few days.”

Fiona’s face lit up. “Oh, thank you, my king. Aunt Belinda is like a mother to me; her happiness is my happiness,” she cooed, hugging him. “You deserve a big thank you.” She took his hand and inserted it in her underwear. “Take me somewhere where there will be just the two of us.”

Ganda was already in deep financial problems. He had been sustaining Fiona’s demands by borrowing and was already heavily laden with debt. There was nowhere else he could borrow the amount of money Fiona wanted so he was forced to embezzle the money from the company where he worked, telling himself he would repay later. But how could he do so with her unceasing demands? So the money remained unpaid.

The fraud was discovered three months later by Frank who worked as the company’s internal auditor. Out of deference for their friendship, Frank invited him to the luxurious uptown Eldorado Club where he broke the unsavoury news to Ganda.

“You know me very well Frank; I don’t know what got into me,” Ganda wailed.

Frank stared at him with eyes full of pity. “You don’t know? I warned you that Fiona was leading you to your destruction but you didn’t want to listen.”

Ganda scratched his head. “Well, give me time to sort it out.”

Frank looked at him. “Be realistic, Ganda. Five million, how are you going to repay it?”

Ganda bit his lower lip. His friend was right. There was no way he could repay that kind of money. All he could do was stare at his feet in utter dejection.

“Well, since you’ve got nothing to say, I’m reporting this to Management the first thing tomorrow,” Frank told him.

“Please help me, Frank; if you report this I will go down for not less than ten years,” Ganda beseeched almost in whisper.

Frank cupped his head in his hands. “This is something that cannot be swept under the carpet, Ganda. Even if I do not report the swindle now, sooner or later it’ll still be discovered. The sooner you face this, the better.”

An idea seemed to have struck Ganda and hope showed on his face. “Maybe I may not have to go to jail after all. Most of the money went to Aunt Belinda’s businesses. I may borrow some money from her and then borrow from a few more people and pay back the money.”

Frank seemed relieved by the idea. “Yes, give it a try. If you can get half from her, you can fix the balance by a bank loan.”

With this resolution, the tension that had gripped Ganda left him. “Then let’s go into the bar and drink to that.”

At that moment Frank’s mobile phone rang. “You go ahead, buddy. The drinks are on me.”

Ganda had just entered the bar when he saw Aunt Belinda. She had her back to him but he recognized her all the same. And the disturbing thing was that she sat at the bar drinking beer with a fat bearded man. He had not thought she drank beer. And the clothes she wore were not the type he had thought she could wear. The blouse exposing her navel and tight-fitting jeans that she was in somehow seemed improper on a middle-aged lady who claimed to be a born-again Christian.

He could have completely missed Fiona. He only recognized her because of her body structure. Apart from that, she looked completely different. Wearing a small hat out of which her hair flowed to her shoulders, she was in tight-fitting blouse and black trousers that looked as if they had been melted on her. Multi-coloured beads were strung together around her waist.

She was dancing vigorously with a pudgy old man in an expensive suit. Anger welled within Ganda. How could Fiona do this to him? And he asked himself a question he should have asked himself long ago. Really, who was this girl?

He caught her by the shoulder and spun her around to face him. “Fiona, what’re you doing here?”

If he thought she would be surprised he was mistaken. She looked at him coolly. “What am I doing here? Having a good time.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She looked at him, contempt engraved on her face like an inscription on gravestone. “What does it look like?”

“I thought you said you’re a born-again Christian?”

Fiona laughed mockingly. “As you can see, I’m not a born-again Christian just as surely I’m not a college girl.”

Her indifference infuriated him. “What do you mean?”

She smiled at him. “Well, I don’t think there is any need to keep the charade as you’ve obviously summed up things. This is the end of the road for the relationship between you and me.”

“I asked what you mean by saying that you are not a college girl!” Ganda shouted.

Fiona went to a table and picked up a glass of beer. “I’ve never gone further than Standard 8,” she said raising her glass as if in a toast. “But I know that there’re some men that go for young school girls. So during the day I pretend to be a school girl. At night

I'm a prostitute. Clever."

Ganda shot his eye at Aunt Belinda. "Your aunt allows you to do this?"

"That old girl is not my aunt," she laughed, sipping from her glass. "She's all part of the game. During the day she plays the role of my aunt. At night, she's a prostitute. I learned all these tricks from her."

Ganda staggered into a chair, his head spinning. Obviously they had been laughing themselves silly at his stupidity all the time. And there was no way he could expect such cold-hearted people to lend him money.

It was jail for him. Goodbye accountant and welcome convict!



There is no Murder in Heaven

In the cold dark night, the descript buildings looked as forbidding as tombstones in an abandoned graveyard. The blasting wind howled like tormented souls as the fog whirled to form eerie ghostlike figures. Muggers, pimps and drug pushers jostled for business on the sidewalks crowded with the jetsam of society who usually come out of their holes to frequent such places when darkness falls. Pathetic figures of beggars hunched around fires built on rubbish heaps. From the drinking joints, blared music that was so loud as if everyone was hard of hearing but bent on catching something.

These were streets of crime and poverty. Nevertheless, just as he was not supposed to be there, there are some things a man does when he has reached the end of his tether. Things that he cannot do in normal circumstances. Phada had reached that point. He was there to contract out the murder of his wife.

His headlights picked up the sign that said TOP MOTEL in front of a big tumbledown building that crouched at the end of the street like a predator. A group of girls in outfits that made them look almost naked were huddled under the poor light of the grimy sign. As he was reversing the car into the small parking lot in front of the motel, the girls swarmed around the car shouting, "Pick me! Pick me!"

He waved them off and killed the engine. For a moment he sat at the wheel contemplating what he was about to do. Murder is a serious thing. It astonished him that he felt no queasiness. With a chuckle, he concluded that the most difficult thing about murder is to decide on the matter. However, once one makes the decision, the deed is a foregone conclusion.

Phada did not love his wife. He had met Jill at a party and after a whirlwind romance, tied the knot with her at the altar. He did not know how it happened but he realised he did not love her the very day they got married.

He was well aware of society's stand on marriage. He could not just say to his wife, 'Jill, I've realised that I do not love you and therefore I'm divorcing you' just a few days after walking down the aisle with her. Prudence required that he try to make the marriage work. Phada therefore settled into married life, pretended he loved her, provided everything for the home, play-acted he enjoyed their life in bed and all those trappings that the propriety of marriage requires. Children came and in this manner the years crawled by.

Marriages without love have one problem. People hold on thinking love will creep in one day. That is where they get it wrong. Love never sidles in. It is either you love somebody or you do not. It is as simple as that. Therefore, starting on the wrong footing, the marriage was a recipe for disaster and doomed even before it had started.

People who knew of his predicament tried to offer various explanations. Maybe there was something wrong with her behaviour. Some said that perhaps someone had bewitched Phada so that he should never love Jill. Others said that it could possibly just be a case of bad chemistry between the two.

Phada himself tried to make sense of his dislike for his wife. They had three children, two boys and a girl. Therefore childlessness could not have been the cause. It could not be her looks for Jill was breathtakingly beautiful with a body like that of a sculptured

Greek goddess. She dressed well and conducted herself impeccably in society.

It could also not be sex. Before he had married Jill, they had a great sex life. This vanished after they got married. He no longer enjoyed their times in bed. To sleep with her he had to work up his desire using images of other women and with time, even this failed to do the trick.

As the years passed by, Phada became more aloof from his wife, spending more time at work and with his friends. Conversations with her disappeared. He became irritable for no reason at all and this began to harm the decorum of his family life.

“You’ve changed, John,” Jill complained on the tenth anniversary of their marriage, tears streaming down her face. “You’re not treating me the way you used to treat me.”

Phada looked at her. “How were I treating you?”

She looked at him with eyes full of love. “You used to be very nice to me. These days you barely notice me. And I don’t remember the last time we made love.”

Frowning, Phada considered what she had said. Been niece to her? He thought he had never been nice to her. It was just things had now gotten worse and therefore she thought the past had been better.

Phada looked at Jill and wondered why he had married her. He felt no love whatsoever for her. This was the best time to tell her that he did not love her, that he had never loved her. Yet something stopped him. Maybe it was because she was very devoted to him so he did not want to hurt her feelings. Subconsciously he knew she would not have accepted a divorce. To her, he was the epitome of a good husband. She would have talked some mumbo jumbo about something being wrong with him and the need that they consult a psychologist, a doctor, a pastor or even a witch doctor to deal with his madness. If he could not find the reasons why he disliked here, there was no way she could believe that he was not bewitched.

Therefore, the opportunity was lost and the marriage dragged on for another five years hoping the feeling would go away with time. Instead, the feeling continued to grow with the years. After so much soul searching, Phada decided enough was enough. He had to end the marriage.

“Simon, you know the problem I’ve been having in my family,” one day he confided to his best friend. “I’m thinking of filing for a divorce.”

Simon looked horrified. “What? Are you out of your mind? How can you even imagine of divorcing a jewel like that? Your wife has it all man, the looks and everything. The closest I get to a woman like that is watching her in a movie. Look at my wife, she looks like some badly modelled clay toy yet I’ve never even thought of divorcing her!”

“Love is not about looks only, Simon.”

“What is it about? If you had a wife like mine you would understand how important looks are. Every day when I look at her, I wonder what wrong I did for God to punish me with a wife like her.”

“Then why are you still with her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s how life is supposed to be,” Simon sighed. “But as for you, I don’t know why you are complaining.”

Phada knew it would be useless to pursue the subject with Simon. The matter had nothing to do with looks. It was simply lack of true affection. He went to see Mdisha, his uncle.

After listening patiently, his uncle laughed. "My dear nephew, I don't see any reason for you to end your marriage."

Phada was astounded. "You don't see any reason? I've told you I don't love her!"

His uncle laughed again. "My dear nephew, there would be no marriages if every man divorced the woman he did not love. Do you know how I ended marrying your aunt?"

"You've never told me," Phada replied.

Mdisha shook his head with regret. "It was a stupid error. You'll agree with me that your aunt resembles a gorilla than a human being. On that ill-fated night, she danced so well that I wondered what it would be like to have the big woman in bed. One thing followed the other and I ended up sleeping with her in my house. Three months later she turned up at my house in the company of her uncle to say she was three months pregnant and I was responsible. That was forty years ago and we're still married up to now. Every time I tried to run away she would beat me up until I finally gave up. Since that time I've not known peace but I'm still with her. That, my boy, is marriage."

"But I thought marriage is supposed to be about love?"

Mdisha laughed as if Phada had said something incredibly foolish. "Love? I've never loved your aunt. I married her because I impregnated her. Full stop."

"So why are you still with her?"

"I don't know. It could be because I already married her. Possibly because of the children. Maybe because at my age it is too late to start afresh," Mdisha said. "I don't want her but the fact is I'm still with her."

Phada decided to take his case to his pastor. He was sure the minister, who was the founding pastor of the church and a powerful man of God, would understand. He met the cleric in his pleasantly decorated office behind his magnificent church.

"I've never cheated on my wife since I married her but I don't love her. To avoid going into the sin of adultery, I'm thinking of divorcing her," Phada stated his case.

"My son," the clergyman replied. "Marriage is a consecrated union ordained by God in the Garden of Eden. As a Christian..."

"But it is the creation of the woman that made the man sin," Phada cut in.

"At the same time, it ensured the survival of mankind. God's ways of doing things are different from our own, son," pointed out the pastor.

"I understand that, pastor. But where the marriage is not working, what is one supposed to do?" Phada wanted to know.

"A marriage cannot fail," the pastor replied. "It simply cannot. The vows made are sacred and therefore cannot be broken-its until death do us part."

Phada was thoughtful. "So, marriage has no second chances?"

"None at all. Given another chance very few men would marry the same women they are married to now. The good thing is that such second chances are never given.

Getting married is like falling into a deep pit where nobody will drop you a rope to climb out no matter what your case is.”

“Even where the marriage is beyond redemption?”

The pastor looked at him with eyes full of understanding. “No marriage is beyond redemption. I’ll give you the example of my own marriage so that you fully understand what marriage is all about. I’ve been married to my wife for thirty years. She is nagging, ill tempered and blames me for every inconvenience she encounters in life and makes my life very miserable.”

“And yet you’re still with her?”

“Yes. Every day I go through a litany of complaints. Sometimes she can be so nagging that I even think of killing her but I do not do so. Of late, her health has been failing and I hope soon she’ll die in her sleep so that I can spend the rest of my days in peace. In short, marriage is a ceaseless struggle in which joy is mixed with pain. Making compromises is the pillar of marriage.”

Horrified, Phada left a very disappointed man. He was surprised that nobody could understand his situation. The fact that they stayed on in their miserable marriages did not mean that he had to hold on to his.

As a final resort he approached his mother, hoping that she would understand. Here he was disappointed again.

“I understand your problem perfectly well, son. Had we been like the others, the faceless masses, divorce would have been the answer. You could even just dump your wife. But you’re someone. Our family is something. We can’t afford to dent our unimpeachable image with a divorce. No. Never.”

“But mum...”

She cut him with a wave of her hand. “I did not marry your father because I loved him. It was because I thought he was someone who was going to make it big in life. Sadly he turned out to be a man who was content with a low paying government job. There were times when I wanted to run away and marry some rich man but I did not. I put up with him until he passed away-wasted thirty-five good years of my life, that’s a quarter of a century- for the sake of the family!”

“You want me to go through a life like that?”

His mother smiled. She was a highly ambitious and domineering woman who had made his father’s life hell. His father, a timid man, had never had any say in the way she run the family. She was now sixty but looked a decade younger, was fit and in excellent health. “No, I wouldn’t.”

Phada saw hope in the response. “You would agree with the divorce?”

“Never. I’ll never countenance divorce. I value the reputation of our family,” she snuffed out his hope.

“In that case, what do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know. You just hope she dies or something happens-but divorce. No!”

“So, it’s until ‘death us do part’?”

“Exactly,” his mother replied unequivocally.

Phada saw his way for escape close with the finality of the hammering in of the last nail in a coffin. He comprehended that he was condemned to live with his unhappy marriage like anyone else.

It was apparent that he would have remained in his marriage had he not met Grace. Nevertheless, meet Grace he did so things took a different course. He met her in a restaurant where she worked as a waiter. It was love at first sight. They fell deeply in love with each other.

Phada was by nature a one-woman man and therefore could not have both women. A further complication was that Grace was now pregnant. Out of the two women, his choice was obvious.

When he told his friend Simon about his quandary, his response stunned him. “Man, you’ve put yourself in sticky situation. If you divorce your wife now, people will say it’s because of Grace.”

“But everyone knows about my family problems...”

“Yes, they do but they’ll all choose not to understand. No matter what you say they’ll say you’re divorcing your wife because you want to marry this girl.”

Phada felt like a drowning man holding to any floating straw. Divorce was out yet he still had to find a way to extricate himself from his depressing marriage. The question was how was he going to do it?

The answer came when he remembered the pastor’s advice- ‘sometimes I think of killing my wife but I don’t’. Killing his wife was the best way out. Considering what he had gone through, he was amazed that he had not thought of this before. All he needed to do was to ensure that the murder would never be traced back to him.

There were two ways of carrying it out: either do it himself or hire someone to do it. The first option, he immediately ruled out. He was incapable of personally killing anyone.

The second option was the most attractive one but it posed a serious challenge. Hired killers do not advertise their services, so how was he going to identify one?

The solution provided itself in a much unexpected way one Saturday afternoon as he sat in a bar drowning his sorrows in alcohol. A man explaining his wife’s shortcomings to a ravaged looking prostitute captured his attention.

“Those are not problems at all,” Phada remarked to the thickset man with a hard-looking face sitting next to him. “I’ve got real family problems.”

The man picked up his can of beer, took a long sip and belched. “Family problems are every man’s undoing unless dealt with firmly.”

Phada glanced at him with interest. “What can you do if you’re stuck in a loveless marriage?”

“Kill the woman,” the stocky man answered easily draining his can. “Divorce is a messy business.”

“But murder is a capital crime,” Phada pointed out.

The man picked up another can and opened it. “Only when you’re caught. There are many ways of making murder look like natural death. This is earth, my friend. It’s only

in heaven that there's no murder."

Phada mulled over what the man had said. Grasping that the man was trying to offer him a solution to his calamity, he poured out his woes.

"In your case, divorce is not an option," the man explained. "You need to permanently get rid of your wife."

"That idea has crossed my mind but it's something I don't have the stomach to do personally."

The man burped and looked around to make sure no one was overhearing them. "Well, there is a man who specialises in dealing with such problems. Goes by the name the Devil. Rather sends unwanted people to meet their maker at a fee. All on the hush-hush."

For the first time in several years, a genuine smile flickered on Phada's face. "That's exactly the type of assistance I need. Is it possible for you to contact the Devil to deal with my problem?"

"Consider it done," the man replied confidently. "I'll make all the arrangements,"

This was the reason why he was at TOP MOTEL, a seedy establishment that let out rooms to those seeking refuge from the law or short time sexual encounters, to meet the killer. Getting out the car to the unpleasant welcome of the wind that filled the air with flying garbage, he belted his great coat, turned up the collar and brought the brim of his hat close to his eyes. He was convinced this made him look like the other unsavoury characters that lurked around the area.

He walked into the motel, wrinkling his nose as the musty smell of the gloomy reception hit him. Behind an old desk sat a gaudy big middle-aged woman with red braids in a blue elastic dress that fitted her like a second skin. She stopped powdering her face and looked up at him. He gave her a thumb up sign.

"Room 12," she said pointing towards a narrow corridor in response to the pre-arranged sign.

The room turned out to be at the end of a dirty hallway. Phada knocked on the door twice fast and twice slowly. The door clicked open and an evil wedge-shaped face with tiny flat snake eyes leapt at him. It was easy to see how the man had earned his name. The hit man was an exact replica of Satan as depicted in pictures: thin, with features like that of a goat, coal black in complexion and dressed in body hugging black clothes. The only thing that was missing were the horns and hoofs. A chill crawled Phada's spine. He looked like a man who could kill you and think nothing of it.

The only furniture in the room was a bed and a basket chair on which was draped the killer's black coat. The assassin stood aside and Phada walked unsteadily in and sat on the edge of the bed. The murderer closed the door and eased himself into the basket chair.

"I want you to kill my wife for me," Phada said without opening pleasantries, wishing to get out of the company of the reedy evil looking man as quickly as possible.

"How do you want her to die?" the hit man asked casually in a husky voice.

"Armed robbery. A robbery in which the woman of the house gets killed," Phada

answered.

The Devil dug his bony fingers into his pocket and dug out a piece of paper and a pouch. Carefully, he rolled a marijuana joint and lit it. He took a deep pull and threw the smoke into Phada's face. "You got an ID of the client?" the Devil asked and when he saw the frown on Phada's face, added quickly. "A picture of your wife. Something I can use to identify her."

Phada smiled. There was no way he was going to give the killer a picture; he could not risk the photograph being found on the Devil in case he was caught. "You don't need any picture," Phada answered, resisting the urge to wave away the ganja smoke. "There'll be only one woman in the house when you make your move and that person will be my wife."

"You mean I kill any woman I find in the house during the hit?"

"Yes," Phada answered emphatically. "My children are away at boarding schools and at the moment we don't have any house servant."

The Devil's flat eyes ran over Phada. The look was unsettling. It was like being looked over by a snake. "Understood. When do you want her wasted?"

"Wasted?" Phada inquired.

"Snuffed out," explained the killer.

"This coming Friday. I'll be at a nightclub until you hit her. After that, give me a call. I'll go home and look properly shocked when I find my house broken into and my wife dead. Just make sure you don't fail and nothing leads back to you."

The Devil laughed. "This is chicken feed to me, man. You'll be a widower by ten o'clock Friday night."

"I'll wait for your call Friday night confirming the good news," Phada said getting up and reaching out to shake the Devil's hand.

The Devil did not proffer his hand. Instead he stood up, put on his coat and rubbed his fingers together in a circular motion. Phada understood the meaning of the gesture.

"Oh, yes your payment," Phada said taking out a thick ward of notes from the inside pocket of his jacket. "Five hundred thousand. But I don't understand; why do you take full payment before doing the job?"

The killer put the money into the pocket of his coat without counting it. Then he shook Phada's hand and moved towards the door.

"One, because I don't fail. Two, I don't think you would want us to meet again after the job," he said his hand on the doorknob. "Friday, 9:30pm, I hit any woman I find in your house. Agreed?"

"To the letter," said Phada cheerfully, now happy that the transaction had been concluded.

The Devil slid out of the room. When Phada reached the corridor, there was no sign of the killer. As he was passing the reception, the receptionist completely ignored him. Outside, the fog had thickened, making everything look hazy. Real cloak-and-dagger, Phada thought with satisfaction as he swaggered to his car.

On the appointed day, Phada got the call at 09:45pm. "It's done," the killer said "Now

I see why you wanted her wasted. She should have been a knockout in her days, but age had caught up with her,” the killer paused and then chuckled wetly. “Thought she looked like...”

Because Phada cut the phone, he did not hear the Devil’s sudden alarmed expression. The details were of no use. His plan had succeeded and that was what mattered. He was now free from his wife. All he had to do was go home, ‘discover’ the murder, report the crime to the police and then go through the motions of the funeral ceremony.

He was about to leave when he got a call on his cell phone from a neighbour telling him to rush home. He literally jumped with joy. That meant the murder had been discovered and he would not have to go through the tricky act of reporting the crime to the police himself. Things were going on far much better than he had planned.

When he arrived home he parked his car alongside the police vehicle he found there. Neighbours were already gathering at the house.

“What happened?” he shouted, rushing into the house.

Nothing prepared him for the shock he had when he saw Jill. She was sitting in a chair. But she was not dead because a dead person does not weep. Phada halted as if he had turned into stone. He could not believe it; the Devil had obviously betrayed him!

When Jill saw him, she got to her feet and threw her arms around him. He shook her off violently. She was not supposed to be alive.

“Phada, it’s me Jill your wife,” she cried.

“I...I...,” he stammered, unable to voice what he was thinking.

“I’m sorry about your mother...”

“What about my mother?”

“I thought they have already told you. She came unannounced this evening. At quarter past nine Elube called me to go and see her child who had developed a high temperature...”

Phada grabbed Jill and shook her violently. “What are you talking about?”

“When I came back, I found that somebody had broken in and killed your mother...”

“What?”

“The burglar killed your mother,” Jill said almost in a whisper. “I’m sorry, dear. The good thing is that members of neighbourhood watch caught the killer as he was trying to escape...”

Even as she spoke, they dragged in the battered body of the Devil who pointed an accusing finger at Phada before collapsing. The assassin died several days later.

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In death Phada was as misunderstood as he was in life. The newspaper headlines ran, MOTHER KILLER HANGED. The story accompanying the title simply talked of the hanging of John Phada for contracting out the killing of his mother. Even the newspaper that carried a more detailed version of the story titled THE EXECUTION OF JOHN PHADA failed to report that the intended victim had been his wife.

Slay Queen and Other Stories

A socialite gets beaten at her own game. It is the title story in this collection of short stories by the master story teller Lawrence Kadzitché. The power of love shines in a story where a man falls in love with a barmaid; a popular pastor has the shock of his life when he realises the girl he has given a lift to is a prostitute; a housemaid plots to snatch her employer's husband with calculated coldness; a conman masquerading as a prophet discovers, too late, how God punishes fake prophets; a fabled philanderer gets a dose of his own medicine; an embittered husband plans to kill his wife, resulting in startling justice; the return of the village hero goes wrong when he returns with a partner; a young man lured to the city learns that not all that glitters is gold—a riveting collection of stories that will linger in the mind.



Lawrence Kadzitché