**SHADOWS OF TIME**

**BOOK COVER**



**Victor Byabamazima** was born at Nyakagyera, Kabale, in 1942. He was educated at Kigezi High School and Kigezi College, Butobere from where he proceeded to Teso College Aloet, then to Makerere University. At Makerere, Byabamazima majored in Philosophy and History and thereafter trained as a teacher. He taught English Language and Literature in English in Kenya and Uganda before being appointed headmaster of Kigezi High School in the early 1980s. Currently he is Director of the Uganda Literature Bureau, Ministry of Education.

In**Shadows of Time** - a tale of seduction, intrigue, greed and betrayal - Flora, the tragic seductress, gets trapped in a web of relationships that she has in very large measure helped to create. Haunted by the fascinating, shadowy and thoroughly evil Tom, who trails her with the unyielding ruthlessness of a vengeful spirit, she eventually falls prey to his humiliating and murderous schemes.

**PART I**

**Chapter One**

“Any final word you wish to say, madam?” asked the Executioner.

Yes. I wish to say something about myself. A story. A story about part of my life and, more so, why I decided to put a noose around my neck.

It all started long ago, on the day I was born. Maybe even before I was born. I believe I was born only to find that there was a boat for me to row along the river of life. I had no choice. I had to row it. But then I reached a point where I could not go any further, because I feared to go on living, for life had given me more of death. And why not die when I could choose to?I am not going to bother you with all the details of my life. However, there is a day, a single day of all the days of my life, which I wish I could forget. But I cannot. It has always come to my mind the moment I make all efforts to forget it. It has followed me all my life, and all my life has been overshadowed by it. It has been a shadow, following me wherever I go. The shadow almost disappeared when the sun of success was at its zenith. That was the time I lived happily with my husband and my son. I do remember those moments when I was bathing in the radiance of the sun and all the troubles in my heart had been washed away. But when the sun walked away to his mother for a night, the shadow, that shadow, grew taller and stronger. It crushed my stature. My horizon of hope dwarfed and I could not see why I should live. I had to die for I could not control my boat any more.

I was coming from school when it all happened. I was walking along the main street of my country's capital city. The city vehicles moved patiently one after another along the main street, making an almost indefinite line. A crowd of people seemed planted on the pavement, while individuals rushed up and down, quietly. The tropical sun was rolling towards the west sending its last smiles to the city, and blocks of buildings towered over humanity with that air of importance common with giants. I walked on and on rubbing my shoulders with other human beings. My fingers gripped a bag full of school-books, and my eyes looked straight ahead of me. I was myself; all alone in that teeming humanity.

All of a sudden a strong wind began to blow. Women held their dresses tightly to themselves lest they showed too much of their womanness in public. The wind blew harder and harder. The smiling sun disappeared behind a rippling dark blanket of clouds. And without much warning, the tropical sky, now burdened with bundles of rain-clouds, leaked. Big drops of water fell on us like pebbles thrown by mischievous children. And before long, a torrent of water poured from above. It was a storm. Everybody ran for shelter. Some people managed to enter shops but most of us were contented to remain on verandas. The wind blew harder, tearing through the pouring water. And it brought with it sheets of water against our unprotected faces. We huddled together in a crowd, all frightened by this sudden leak of the sky. Nobody said a word. Everybody seemed to be listening to the harsh music of the falling rain accompanied by fires of lightning and quarrelling thunder. As the wind sent to us more jets of water, we moved further into the verandah until there was no room for movement. But the wind did not stop, nor did the rain. It went on. The street was almost covered by a river. Trees groaned as they swayed this way and that under the strong hand of the wind. And it went on and on. And nobody said a word. My dress was already soaked, and my underwear got stuck on me like a stamp on a letter. I looked aside to see who might be my neighbours. Men, women, children; all of them. We had been meshed together by the forces of nature.

The wind began to blow with less force and the trees swayed gently as if announcing the end of the battle. Rather too quickly, some of them regained their dignified grace and simplicity and seemed to have forgiven, or even forgotten, the ruthlessness of the wind. The amount of water falling became less and less. The rumbling of thunder could be heard faintly. It had stopped quarrelling, and it seemed to be retreating towards the back yard of the heavens.

“Madam, your bag is cold, keep it away from me,” one of my neighbours complained and caused laughter in the crowd. The laughter was a bit dry and impersonal. It was the laughter of the crowd but not of a person. A release of tension and fear, but it was laughter all the same.

“Where have you been all this time not to complain?” a man asked, and there was laughter again, this time different: some grains of human texture were reflected in it.

“What did he say?” someone else asked and continued: “He must be a lucky one to have been next to a young beauty like that one.” I kept quiet and moved my bag away from him. He looked into my face and beamed. I nearly cursed him but thought it would be a waste of words.

“Sorry, Madam,” he said, “I was only joking.”

“It's all right,” I lied. I didn't like his breath. It smelt of onions.

The rain was tired for its speed was slow and even gentle. Soon it would decline into a drizzle and then perhaps just stop dead. Vehicles began to appear again on the street, and some individuals began to squirm out of the crowd and walk away along the pavement.

I moved away from the verandah when I saw many people daring the drizzle. I put the bag of books on my head to protect my hair and waded quickly along the pavement. I was walking with others, but I did not pay much attention to them.

“God is a funny creature,” one of the men said to his friend as they walked quickly pastme.“Why?” his friend asked.“Why? Why should he make good things like rain to create and destroy? Now look, the road is like a river, and I'm sure some crops have been destroyed by this storm.”“God knows beyond our knowledge.” The second man ended the topic with those words familiar to most of our ears. Through a glass window I saw some good dresses and necklaces. I debated quickly whether or not to go nearer and get a closer look. One voice inside me said I should hurry home before it was dark, while another persuaded me that it would not take long. I obeyed the second voice and went to the window. As I looked at the dresses I sensed someone standing close to me. I could hear his quick breathing as if he had been running, and a smell of onions invaded my nose. I looked at him and caught him eyeing me from head to foot. He was the other man. I shifted the bag of books to the side on which he was standing, and pushed it further until it touched him. I heaved my chest forward a bit as if I wanted someone to scratch my back, and then I pretended to go away. I say 'pretended' because I wanted the company of a man. Not particularly at that moment but in my life. At school my friends teased me that I was not much of a woman simply because I did not have a boyfriend. I was beautiful, they said, and they saw no reason why I avoided men so much. I could not tell them why either, for I did not know the reason. I simply did not want men or perhaps my time had not yet come.

As that man stood near me I became aware of my womanhood. A knife of excitement cut sharply inside me and my heart shook sending vibrations of fear all over my body.

He coughed meaningfully, at which I turned my face suddenly towards him. He looked at me as if I was a bone and he a dog. A car from a near distance swerved and directed its lights on both of us. I winced and closed my eyes. By the time I opened them again the car had gone. I followed it with my eyes and saw its rear lights disappearing swiftly into the distance below the towering city buildings. Close to where we stood, a dead sparrow came floating on running water. It passed by, head down as if drinking the water, and continued its journey down the gutter.

I looked at the window again, but this time giving him my back to see. For I had learnt that some men would follow a woman anywhere after seeing her buttocks. He whistled softly but said nothing. I wanted him to say something. I wanted a man and he gave me the impression of a man who would satisfy my curiosity and desire. I dropped a pencil to the ground intentionally and bent to pick it. I was in a mini-skirted school uniform.

“Hello girl,” he said. “There is someone over there who wanna see yaa.”“Where?” I said, keeping my eyes to the window.“Across the street, me lady.”“Who wants me?”“A certain man.”“Where is he?” I said, turning my face.“Over there in a car. He says he knows yaa, and that he's yar friend.”“Tell him I don't know him,” I said as I walked away.“But he wanna see yaa!” he pleaded. “Where? There? It's very far,” I said as I doubled my speed. But I could not walk faster than he. Fear overpowered me and gripped my throat. A voice from my inside, and now I know it was a bad one, encouraged me saying, “Have courage girl, this is your chance to get a man.”“Shall I tell'm to bring the car here?”“Where? Here? But who is he?”“He says he is yar friend.

“Me? No. But who is he? Where is the car? That one?” I pointed to the car.“No.”“That red one or the cream one?”“Yaa, the cream one. Bellette.”

I kept quiet. The idea of riding in a car had overcome my resistance. I decided to act quickly otherwise I would be the loser - if he went away.

“I'm gonna bring the man. Stay here,” he suggested and I felt relieved, seeing that he had decided for me. A few minutes later, he brought the car and opened the door for me. I entered hesitantly and sat in the front seat, keeping a respectful distance from him. The city lights were already on, and a few stars were beginning to peep through the dark ceiling above us. The west showed no trace of the sun. It had gone to sleep leaving us all alone to grope through the dark. My neighbour drove on, hurriedly too, but saying nothing.

“Where is the man who wanted to see me?” I broke the silence.“Me.”“You mean you were telling lies?”“Yee don't wan me? He's a man and I'm another. What difference does it make?”“I don't know. And where are you taking me? I want to go home,” I protested.“Whose?”“Whose? Where I stay, of course.”“Where do you stay?”

I kept quiet. I did not know whether or not it was proper to tell him where I was staying. I did not know him and I did not know what he would turn out to be. He could have been anything. A good man, a bad man, a thief, a robber, a murderer, a sadist, a Christian, a Moslem, a Hindu, a pagan, anything. I did not know what to answer. He drove on and on.He seemed to know where he was going.

The sky did not become any brighter. I looked through the window and I could count the stars that winked timidly in the dome above. The evening air caressed my face like a baby's hand with no definite purpose. Vehicles passed us by, and we overtook others. There were many of them in the city. I wondered where all those vehicles were going. They moved as if without a purpose. I wondered why I was in the car. And the thought of it now is very nauseating.

“Please, take me home. It's getting too late.”“Where do you stay?”I kept quiet. I don't know why.“Tell me young one, you are so nice and fresh. Where do you go to school? It must be a good school.”I kept quiet. He had asked too many questions at a go.

“Are you hungry or would you like a bottle of beer?”

I kept quiet. He drove on, slowly this time. He gnashed his teeth as if he would not need them after that. Slowly, he brought the car to a stop near a bar and ordered me out. All of a sudden, his face resembled death whose picture I usually see on electric poles.

“I want to go home. This is not my home. Take me home!” I said.

He looked at me and smiled. He touched my arm and pulled me to himself. I resisted the pull and refused to get close to him. A smell of onions hit my nose, and I turned my face away. Nearby, I saw a man standing clumsily supporting his weight against a wall Gradually, he pulled his body out of an old pair of trousers and began urinating in a zig-zag way on stagnant rain water. Presently, a car pulled up beside us and a man together with a woman came out. They held each other's hands and walked into a bar. I followed them with my eyes until they disappeared behind many other people in me bar. I looked at my neighbour who had also been attracted by the same couple. He was still looking into the bar. I looked at my dress and wished it was not a school uniform. For I wanted to enter and see what people enjoyed in there. In the meantime, the man who was urinating finished. He staggered away from the spot. But somehow, he stepped on an unstable stone which betrayed him. He struggled to gain his balance but all in vain. In a split second, he fell in the stagnant water where, a minute ago he had been urinating. This sight made us burst out laughing. We laughed to the edge of hysteria. Moments later I found myself in the man's arms still laughing my head off. I do now remember how he held my head, my face towards him, and how he brought his lips to mine. I do remember how he asked me gently, after the experience, to go into the bar for a bottle or two.

“I'll take yaa home after here. That is, after drinking something.”“But I can't enter the bar in my uniform,” I explained.“Yaa mean yaa wanna change first?”“Yes,” I said.“All right. I'll take yar home and ye'll change yar clothes. And yaa must promise me.”“Yes, I promise. Take me home and I'll come with you,” I said, smiling. He smiled and started the car.“Where is yar home?” he asked.“Nakudi.”“Nakudi, you said?” he said as if wondering.“Yes. You don't know where Nakudi is?” I asked.“I know. There's no place I don't know in the whole city. Every street, every road, and every place in the city I know.”

I kept quiet.“Do you stay with anybody?” he asked.“Yes.”“Who? With a brother?”

“No.”“With yar parents?”“No.”He kept quiet.“I stay with my sister.”“Yar sister? Good. Sisters are not usually bad to stay with. They understand.”“What do they understand?” I asked to keep the conversation going.“City life. Which way now? Right or left?”“Left.”“You stay in such a good place? Your sister must be working somewhere.”“You stop here.”“Where?”“There. There. Here, thank you. Don't come, stay here. I'll change and come.”

My sister was not in the house. And that helped me a great deal. I had rehearsed how I would tell her a lie that I had been invited to the National Theatre to see a play which we were studying for the examinations. I did not know how she would take it. So, I wrote a small note telling her that I had just gone to the theatre and that I would be back as soon as the play was over.

I changed quickly from the school uniform and put on a brown mini kitenge. I fixed a wig on my head and put on my Sunday-best shoes. I put a neat, clean school uniform in a bag together with books I would need the following day, and then joined my new friend in the car. He started the car and we went off.

The sky was dark; the few stars that had been twinkling had by now disappeared. Most of the road was bumpy and was strewn with stagnant water. Dirty, muddy water splashed against both sides of the car as we moved on. People ran away at the sight of the vehicle for fear of mud splashes.

We visited most of the bars in the outskirts of the city. And by 10.00 p.m. I was already drunk. My new friend, Tom - I by then knew his name - suggested that we should go somewhere where we could be by ourselves. I suggested his house, but he rejected the idea as he was a married man and had children. I could not accept his idea of going to my sister's place as it would be bad manners. My sister could not stand it. She had always regarded me as a well-behaved girl, and most of all, too young to bring men home. In the end, Tom suggested that we should go to a hotel. The idea was new to me. I had never slept in a hotel nor with any man. But that night, I agreed to go with a man and I slept in a hotel.

Towards the early hours of the morning, I was awakened from my deep sleep by a sharp noise. Some bright light danced in the room and another noise crashed on the roof of the building. Windows were rattling and doors kicked as if clamouring for the freedom to throw away bolts and nails. Moments later I knew it was raining. It was a thunderstorm again. Beside me lay a man, snoring. I touched myself and felt as if I was touching someone else. I had changed. I was a woman. That night I became a woman and I would never be a girl again.

I held my head in my hands and began to cry. I could have gone on crying but for the thunder which went on with a threatening noise as if buffeting the building. I jumped off the bed and ran to the door to switch on the lights. I wanted light, and I cannot tell you why. I do not know why. I went back to the bed, tucked myself between the sheets close to Tom and fell asleep again, as if nothing had happened.

Around seven o'clock in the morning, I woke up to find Tom looking at me. It seemed he had been awake for some time. He was a fine man. He had broad shoulder with strong muscles perched on a slender frame. He had a handsome face, too, but with something like a stitch on his chin. A fair picture of a man on the whole. A voice from inside told me that now I had had a man and therefore I was a woman. I was a woman, and the thought of it sent tears to my eyes which I removed with the edge of a bed sheet.

“What is yar name, again?” he asked.“Flora.”“Where do yee go to school?”“But I told you everything,” I pointed out.“Oh yah. Yee told me. But I've forgotten.”“Well, it means you didn't care at all.”“No, no, no. Not that. It's because of the other beers and whiskies. I really care for yee, andI'll prove it to yee.”“When?”“Yee'll see. I mean it dear.” He patted me.“But where do you work?” I asked.“First tell me yar school.”“And you'll give me the job as you promised?”“Did I promise ye that?” He yawned.“Yes, you did. Oh, well maybe you were drunk. I suppose you were drunk.”“No, now I remember. I will help yee.”“Where do you work?”“We are businessmen. My friend and I. Yee'll soon see him.”I kept quiet.“In which class are yee?”“Four. Senior Four.”“Senior Four? But ye are still young!”

“Am I? Well, it is because... well, I think I am much older now.” I giggled.“I mean by appearance. What do yee hope to do after Senior Four?”“I don't know.”“Continue with further studies?”“No.”“Why not?”“I can't pass.”“Then what will ye do?”“I want to work. I want a job. You think you can help me?”“When? Now? But ye are still at school.”“After my exams. It's only a few months to the end of the year. You think you can help me?”He kept quiet.“Or can you ask your friend for me?”“Don't worry. I'll do it for yee. We shall do it together. We know many people in high places.”“Thank you very much.”“What kind of job do you like?”“Any. Any good job.”“Because we can fix yee in our business.”“Really! That would be good!”

We held each other tightly as if separation was a taboo.

A morning chill swept through the room, and this made the hold on each other tighter and tighter. Moments later, some rays of the morning sun blessed our room. Seeing that, I began to think of school hours again. We left the bed and washed ourselves in preparation for leaving the hotel.

“Tom,” I said. “What is your address?”“Don't worry about addresses. We shall be meeting every day. Almost every day. Do yee know how to type?”“No. But I can learn. Say within two months or three.”“But then yar exams?”“Oh, yes, my exams. Well, all I want is a good job. You think I can get one in the Airways, Tom?”

“Yee wanna that? Why not? I've friends there. Only let us meet every day. I shall tell yee all. Don't worry. I shall plan for yee as long as yee are with us.”“Thank you. I wish I could get a job,” I said as I put on my school uniform.“Yee are a clever girl, Flora. Yee girls are terrific!”“We are old enough.”“Yee must be. Now, how will yee go, by taxi or by bus?”

I looked at him in amazement. Was he not going to take me to the school? I was hoping that he would take me so that my friends who used to tease me could see me in a car with a man.

“Take this for your taxi to the school, and this for a new pair of shoes, my dear.”

“Thank you. Oh no! Six thousand shillings! My goodness, you are very kind. Thank you very much indeed!”

I took it eagerly, and in a moment I was planning how to use it. One thousand shillings for stockings. The rest for anything. Preferably a dress. No, perhaps shoes, for a dress would be more noticeable and could cause suspicion.

“Thank you Tom. Shall we meet again? This evening, you said? Where?”“Where we met. It is a good place to meet. I hope it will rain again. That storm brought us together.”“Yes it did. I hope it will keep us together.”

We embraced each other and then left our room together, hand in hand. I went to school, and he went somewhere I did not know.

I remember very well how I felt that day. A bit different. Not happy and not particularly depressed. My friends seemed strange to me and, most likely, I looked strange to them. For they kept away from me. Their sweet and ready smiles were now thin, and their laughing eyes to me seemed to spell mockery. Why was it so? I could not answer that question. But a voice from inside whispered 'courage, you are no longer a girl, you are a woman.' I held my head in my hands and began crying. Everybody looked at me and was surprised. I wish I could forget the day I met the first man.

**Chapter Two**After three months, Tom and I had got to know each other quite closely, and had become a pair of good friends. We used to meet every evening. To add to our company, he had introduced me to his friend. His name was Kit, and they were partners in their business. They never told me what it was, and I did not bother to find out. The fact was that I was one of them and they gave me a lot of money. Sometimes I wondered what I would do with it. As a matter of fact, my sister was beginning to suspect the source of that money. I had bought many expensive perfumes, dresses, shoes, knickers, slacks and many other things a woman would wish to own.

There was an obvious sudden change in my habits of dress. Within a month I had been transformed into someone else. Many people would think I was a working girl: someone like those glamorous personal secretaries to managers or directors of big companies. My wardrobe was already competing with my sister's, who was herself a personal secretary to the chairman of the National Marketing Board. My schoolmates admired me, others perhaps envied me. They thought, I believe, that it was my sister who was giving me all that. My sister sometimes stopped short of asking me where I had got those things. But then she was so loving a sister that she never wanted to hurt me, especially at the time I was supposed to be preparing for the forthcoming School Certificate examinations. I wish she had rebuked me, but it's now rather late.

I do not wish to blame her at all. But then I think her silence encouraged me to acquire things by surrendering myself to money-men. The more money I got from them the more ambitious and money-hungry I became. I felt like owning every good thing I saw. Good watches and necklaces attracted me as gold would. Every fashion I read and heard about stuck in my mind and, immediately, I would mention it to my friends. They never said 'no' to my requests. They always promised to help me. And they did, though they did not give me everything I asked for - simply because, I believe, some of them were terribly expensive. But they looked after me very well.

Before long, I had come to regard them as the most important of all things. Mention Tom or Kit and I would jump with excitement. I could not think properly in class, and it would be particularly bad in the afternoons, for the thought of meeting Tom or Kit in the evening would reduce any other thought to nothingness.

So, within three months, short months really, they had sown in me a seed of trust which grew into a big tree. I found myself sheltering under this tree, completely dependent on them. And they seemed to like me, too. One thing I never understood was, until late in our friendship, why both of them liked me so much. Was it love, sex or something else? I did not bother to think of an answer to that. There was no need for such philosophical questions. I only enjoyed myself.

One evening, I was at home all alone. My sister had gone home to our parents. She had asked me not to go anywhere else until she came back. And so I stayed at home doing all sorts of little things, waiting for her.

It had been a rather hot day, and the evening was still warm, I was relaxing on my bed, half naked. At around 7 pm I heard a knock on the front door. It was followed by someone's voice calling. It was a man's voice.

“Anyone at home?”

I kept quiet. It was not Tom's voice. Not even Kit's.

“Anybody at home?”

I kept quiet. I was frightened.

“Jane, Jane,” he called.

Jane was my sister's name. It must be her boyfriend, I thought.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Jane, you are in and you can't hear me?” he said ironically.

“Hold on,” I said, hurrying to the door.

“Jane. Oh, it's you Flora.”

“Yes. Come in sir.”

“Thank you. Where's Jane?”

“I don't know, sir.”

“You don't know? She hasn't come back from duty?” he asked as he sat down.

“She didn't work today, sir.”

“She didn't? Why? Is she sick?”

“No. No sir. She went away to the village.”

“But you said you don't know where she is, Flora,” he said as he opened one of the magazines which was lying on a stool.

“I mean. I don't know when she will be here, sir.”

“Didn't she tell you?”

“No, sir.”

“Now, young girl, don't call me sir all the time. It makes me feel too old!” He laughed.

“That's what I'm taught at school,” I grinned.

“You are taught to call any man sir?” He stood up lazily; he had a big stomach which made him look lazy.

“Yes, sir,” I confirmed.

He shook his head and then asked me whether Jane was likely to come that night.

“I don't know. She doesn't stay out except when she goes out with you.” He laughed. I giggled. Then a long silence followed.

“Are you here alone?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don't you fear?”

“Fear? Fear what? Not at all.”

“I mean people who may come here to disturb you?”

“I am all right.”

“Let me see whether you are all right,” he said and stretched out his hand to touch me. I ran away playfully. He did not follow me.

“Flora,” he called out, looking at the magazine.

“Sir.”

“Come and show me whether or not you fear people.”

“No. Not at all, sir.”

“Why?”

“I am afraid,” I replied giggling. I was beginning to sense what he wanted with me.

“What do you fear, Flora?”

“Nothing, sir. Not at all.”

“Then come here.” He picked another magazine and crossed his legs. “Come and see this picture. It is really good.”

“Where is it?” I asked coming to him, mindful of his intention.

“Over here.” He breathed hard.

“Where is it sir?” I was warming up. I became brave enough and went to him. What I expected happened. As I approached him, he threw down the magazine and held me by the flank. He turned me rather roughly to face him, and pressed his lips to mine. We struggled until I tore myself from him and ran away to my bedroom. I threw a curse or two at him and slammed the door.

I kept quiet. He kept quiet, too. But I confess I wanted him. I had lost fear of men, unfortunately. Moreover, I wanted to see what sort of a man my sister had. We were both women, and we would be more equal than ever before if we shared one man. I applied some cosmetics to my face, changed into a much shorter dress, and then joined him again in the sitting-room. I went straight to where the magazines were, picked one and walked flirtatiously to my bedroom. I left the door open. It was up to him to take the initiative. A minute later, I saw him entering my bedroom. I had not made a mistake.

“Flora, I am sorry if I annoyed you.”

I ignored him.

“I am sorry, Flora,” he said and touched my shoulder.

“What do you want?” I asked him.

“Nothing,” he said and then dug his hand between my thighs. He held me tightly, so much that I felt the grip of a man. For the first time I knew why my sister was fond of him.

So in the end, I was equal to my sister. For some vague reason I felt overjoyed. It was like a dream.

“You think Jane will come tonight? She should have been here,” he said grinning.

“I don't know.”

“Why don't you come with me? Let's go out.”

I kept quiet. I wanted to talk to him about a job. I wanted him to help me get one. Now that we were much closer, we could talk it over without much strain.

“Will you bring me back?”

“Of course. Before Jane is here,” he smiled (and now I can see that his smile was false).

“All right. We shall go, but...”

“But what?”

“I have something to ask you.”

“Go ahead.”

I kept quiet.

He kept quiet and began to swing his keys on a long chain.

“I have always wanted your help. I'm looking for a job.”

He looked at me, and I looked away. His eyes were full of surprise.

“Any job. After my examinations.”

“I see. I see what you mean. That should be easy. Jane hasn't said anything about it, though.”

“Jane... well... Jane expects me to find my own way through,” I said smiling.

“When are you doing your exams?”

“November.

“Oh, you are in Senior Four?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That should be easy.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Well in fact, our going out together tonight can help us. I'm going to a party at the university. We are likely to meet people who can help. Big men. So, let's go and try. Are you ready?” “Yes, sir.”

“Don't call me sir, Flora. I don't think I qualify now. Just call me Mike,” he said laughing, and the whole bulk of his body shook in sympathy, as it were.

I smiled. I knew what I wanted. All I wanted was a job. A few minutes later, we were heading for the university in his big Benz car.

That night the sky was medalled with thousands of stars, smiling and smiling. There was no cloud anywhere to be seen. The evening air was cool and it kissed my face as the car slid through it. Soon we were at the university. The party had already started. It was a swinging party, and many people were on the floor, dancing.

“Let's get to the other side, it's less crowded.”

I nodded.

“Are you afraid? You look frightened.”

I kept quiet.

Mike led me on through a group of people dancing until we got vacant chairs in the garden.

“It's a lot better here,” he said. “I shall get you a drink.”

I kept quiet. The moon was beginning to toddle in the eastern sky. And one of the stars, among millions, twitched and raced a distance in the dome, and then disappeared. Other stars seemed to look on with smiles of abundant knowledge.

“What will you take, Flora?” Mike asked.

“I don't know.” I smiled.

“I'll choose for you; a beer.”

“No, sir. A Fanta.”

“A Fanta? Try whisky. It's good for a change.”

He went away grumbling, and came back moments later with a Fanta for me and a beer for himself.

“You like the place?” he asked me.

“Yes. It is good,” I replied. Presently, a man came to where we were seated. He had a glass of beer in one hand, and a cigarette in the other.

“Meet my niece. Flora is her name,” Mike introduced me to the man. I grew puzzled. I was not Mike's niece. Stupid. I grinned tightly.

“He is Simon. Simon Lupoi,” Mike went on.

“I'm Simon. I must have seen you before,” he said enthusiastically.

“You might have,” Mike said amiably.

I kept quiet and sipped my Fanta.

“If not, then I must have met someone who resembles her. She resembles Jane,” the man said.

“That's most funny, Simon. Most funny, indeed. For my niece to resemble my girlfriend is rather interesting,” Mike said, laughing.

“It must be. Anyhow, you have a nice niece. Is she working here?”

“Ask her. Don't tell me you have grown frightened of young ladies, of late.” Mike laughed again. Simon laughed, too.

I fidgeted.

“Flora,” Simon said, “do you work around here?”

“No sir,” I answered with a tremor.

“Where do you work please?”

“I don't.”

He ran his eyes over me, seemingly looking at my expensive dress, necklace and other adornments.

I kept quiet.

“She is not working, not yet,” Mike coughed. “But she would like to work. That is why I brought her here with me in order to meet you.”

“I see,” Simon said, looked at me, and sighed.

A brief silence followed, but was cut short by music from the house.

“What job would you like, Flora?” Simon asked.

“I don't know.”

“Well, any job suitable for a school-leaver. Any good job, Simon,” Mike helped me.

“You are doing your exams this year?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Which school?”

I smiled.

He kept quiet.

Mike coughed.

“Do you know any commercial subjects?”

I hesitated.

“Can you type, for instance?” Simon asked.

“No sir.”

We kept quiet.

“Which subjects do you like most?”

“English, sir.”

“That's pretty useful,” Mike put in.

“What else?” Simon continued to interview me.

“What else? Aa... Geography and... aa... Religious Studies,” I said almost cursing both of them. Why bother me? Why ask me so many questions? So many girls had got jobs without any interview. Was I not as good as they were? I became annoyed with myself, and I think it showed in my face, for Simon seemed to have sensed my uneasiness and shifted his stare from me. He stood up, finished his drink in one gulp, and then looked at me.

“Flora, let's go and dance.”

I kept quiet. I was debating whether to refuse or not. But then I decided to accept. What use would it be to refuse? He could give me a job.

We danced quietly. Simon was a gentleman in most respects, well-dressed, clean-shaven and careful with people he talked to. He did not hold my fingers tightly nor did he fumble with them as Tom and Kit would have done.

One number was over and I showed signs of wanting to go back to my seat.

“Can't we dance another one, Flora? You still look fresh.” I kept quiet and stayed. “You dance very well.”

“Thank you, sir,” I bit my lip.

“How did you learn how to dance?”

“I don't know,” I said shyly. I had never attended a party like that one. Everyone looked like everyone else. I mean the way they behaved. So gentle, happy and relaxed. There were big and small men, short ones, tall ones, fat and wide, and even thin and sickly ones. But they respected one another. There were women, too. Beautiful ones and the not so pretty ones, too. Young women and the rather not-young-anymore. Fat ones with flabby buttocks and slim ones with flat behinds.

They looked happy. They had an air of confidence around them. The atmosphere was peaceful. People talked to one another without raising their voices unnecessarily. It seemed as if their voices had been regulated to a certain tone. In such a place, however, I did not feel one of them: I felt a stranger; and indeed I was, for I could claim nobody that I knew. Mike? Well, Mike was my sister's man, but that was not enough reason for me to trust him. I looked around only to see some men gazing at me.

“Flora,” Simon called me as if he had been following my mind. I looked at him and smiled.

“You know them?” he asked.

“Who? Those?”

“Yes”.

“No, sir. I know nobody here.”

“Nobody? Not even Mike?”

“Except Mike.”

“How about me?”

I kept quiet.

We danced on. Slowly.

“Flora. This job of yours. Why can't your uncle get you one?”

I kept quiet. I did not know what he meant by my uncle getting me a job. My uncles were all in a village living off peasant farms. They had never gone to school. They knew nobody in high places. How could they get a job for me? I almost told him so, but then I remembered that I had been introduced to him as Mike's niece. This tricky world!

“He is trying to.”

“I see,” he said.

I kept quiet and danced on. I twiddled my buttocks in a youthful way. At school we used to call them our 'governments'. They were our identity, social identity, economic prowess, and other things which enabled us to get whatever we wanted from men. “Come to my office and see what we can do for you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Come tomorrow.”

“Where is your office, sir?”

“I am a manager of one of the big companies here.” He said with a twinkle in his eye, and then looked away. I kept quiet. I did not know what to say next. “I'll give you my name and address before I go. Remind me please.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Do you play any game?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

“No?

I smiled. He smiled back at me. “No, sir,” I confirmed.

“You are agile.”

I kept quiet. I did not know the word.

“Do you stay with Mike?” he continued.

“Sometimes,” I lied.

“And sometimes?”

“I stay with other people.”

“Like me?”

I smiled. I was beginning to enjoy his company.

“No, with my relatives.”

“I see. That should be good.” He coughed.

We kept on dancing, quietly. I liked it. Suddenly, I began to wish that I were as highly educated as those people near me. Or at least, that I were as rich as they looked. I had money, too, but it was not my money as I had not worked for it. I wanted to have my own money. I could not fail to associate money with education. Not for a single moment. I believed that with education one could have money. And when I looked around, I definitely confirmed it.

Education opens up many ways of getting money. And without money there is not much one can be proud of. At least visibly. And without pride and confidence in oneself, there is no use in living. Life would be flat, stale and hopeless.

“What are you thinking about? You look moody,” Simon asked.

“Me? Oh, nothing. Nothing much really. I was only quiet,” I stammered. “Only that I want to have a rest. Do you mind?”

“No. Not at all. I have really enjoyed your company, although it was rather short. I hope next time it will be much longer than it has been,” he said.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don't forget to come tomorrow. I'll give you my address before I leave.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He kept quiet, and kept on gazing at me. From the way he was looking at me, I could see that he had become interested in me. I felt gratified, for that is what I wanted. I wanted to persuade him into liking me so that he could give me a job, in the end. To be associated with a manager would be very advantageous. For that way getting a job would be easy.

He took me back to my seat where I found a cluster of men. Mike was one of them. A few hours back we had been together in bed, and now he was my 'Uncle'. This funny world. I became nervous when so many male eyes found me a focal point. I felt a bit dehumanised. I did not know why. But many questions ran through my head quickly. Why had I to be a centre of attraction for those strangers? Did I mean anything to them? Was I being looked at just as a mere heap of sex? I became angry with myself, and caught myself breathing hard. All the youthful pride in me as 'a daughter of my mother' drained out. I was a woman, like any other women, and many men knew it, including Mike.

“Flora,” Mike said, “I want to introduce you to my friends.” I kept quiet.

He mentioned their names as they said 'hello' to me in turn. I almost felt like vomiting by the time he completed the formality.

“What's the matter, Flora?” Mike asked, puzzled. I stayed silent.

“Flora,” he repeated in a commanding voice.

“Let's go home. I want to go home,” I replied.

I saw his face distorting into furrows of confusion. He looked at me as if to say 'you fool, why can't you see I'm trying to help you!' I looked away to avoid the fire in his eyes. Quickly, I realised that I was being silly. Although I hated the presence of some men, I could be old enough and tolerate them in order to get what I wanted. With that in mind, I allowed my face to beam with a smile.

“What is the matter you girl?” one of the men asked me.

“Nothing, sir.”

“But you looked as if you were sick.”

“I was feeling lonely.” I caused them to laugh. Men are silly. How easily they can be deceived by women! So I thought with feminine pride.

“Now, look here lady, don't feel lonely when you are in the company of good men. Men like us,” one of the men advised me and laughed. Others joined in. I did not know what was funny. Perhaps men see fun where women arc blind. Maybe they were laughing at the word “Lady”. Was I a lady? Maybe they were not laughing as far as laughing goes. I did not know; I do not know even now. Men are strange.

“Flora,” Mike said, “I want you to meet Mr John Ruhu. He is a lecturer here.”

“I have already met him,” I said with controlled anger. Anger, yes; I was angry with myself.

“Meet me again!” Ruhu said as he stretched out his hand to me. All the men laughed and watched us. I saw I had no alternative but to accept his hand. They clapped as we shook hands and then they raised their glasses in cheers for the occasion. I did not know what to do, and a fanny feeling struck me that I was being fooled.

“Why should you feel lonely at this hour, Flora?” Ruhu asked me, and I liked his voice. Deep and slow. No haste.

I smiled.

He smiled back at me.

“You seem to understand each other now,” Mike interjected. Everyone else said yes, yes. I looked away to hide a kind of laughter which was already full in my cheeks. My eyes met a beautiful pattern of lighting decorations in the garden, and my laughter dissolved in the greater beauty of flowers a few yards from me. My nerves calmed down, and my mind relaxed.

“Why don't you go and dance and be away from us?” one man suggested.

“I hope you are not jealous, gentlemen. But if it is your wish, Flora and I shall go and dance,” Ruhu said as he poured a glass of beer in his mouth. Strangely, I began to admire the whole group, especially the way they expressed themselves in the English language. I had always wanted to express myself in a similar manner, but so far I had not succeeded. I liked reading books in English, and reading novels was my number one hobby.

“Flora,” Ruhu said. “Let's go and dance. These gentlemen don't want us here. What do you think?”

I did not know what to think. As I speak, I have realized that thinking can be a very rare thing. A very difficult thing... even a violent process. I could not think then especially about dancing or not dancing. Mr Ruhu's way of saying anything in a carefree manner was beginning to captivate me. I began to fear that I might like him too soon. We left the group and marched to the dance floor where we squeezed ourselves among a crowd of dancers. We found a spot and began dancing. I could see Simon, my manager friend, a few yards from me. He was holding a young woman close to him and seemed not to care what was happening around him. I began to wonder whether or not that young woman was looking for a job like me and that she had been promised an appointment for tomorrow as well. I began to wonder, I don't know why, whether these men really meant whatever they told us, especially when we were in a weak position of looking for a job. I began to wonder whether we women meant much to these men apart from sex. I went on wondering and wondering, for which woman could enter the man's situation and understand him? I wondered and I still wonder.

“You are quiet, Flora. Are you still feeling lonely?” Mr Ruhu asked.

“No, sir.”

“Then say something.”

I kept quiet. I had no words to pick from.

“Have you ever been here?”

“No, sir.”

“I mean on the campus.”

“Campus?” I did not know the word.

“Well, at the university.”

“Yes sir,” I lied. I had never stepped on to the campus. However, I had heard many stories about the university. Many of my school-mates had been to men students' rooms, and they usually boasted of having university students as boyfriends. It sounded like an achievement. They felt as if they were themselves part of the university. And now that I was dancing with a university lecturer, I felt I had scored a very high mark in socialisation.

“Mike has just told me that you want a job.”

“Yes, sir,” I gasped with anxiety.

“What sort?”

“I beg your pardon, sir.”

“What kind of job do you want?” he said slowly.

“Any job sir.”

“Any?”

“Yes, sir. Any job that suits me.”

“How shall I know that?”

I smiled at him.

He smiled back.

“Can you tell me more about yourself for instance?” he asked.

“I'm doing my School Certificate this year.”

“Yes?”

I looked at him shyly and said nothing.

“I mean, what else can you tell me?” he asked.

“And I want to work after the exams.”

“Go ahead.”

I kept quiet.

He held me by my shoulders and looked seriously into my face and said: “What can I do for you?”

“I don't know, sir.”

“What can you do?”

I kept quiet. We continued dancing.

And I was cursing myself. Why did I not answer him? Where did the words go when I needed them most? I had lost the chance! We danced and danced. The crowd of dancers was getting thicker and thicker and partners were getting closer and closer to each other. I was beginning to feel the masculine warmth from my lecturer friend. He seemed to like our contact, for he did not complain. It suddenly occurred to me that I could exploit that closeness in order to trap him into liking me... as a woman. I got much closer to him, put my wigged head on his chest, and acted as if I was either in love or drunk. The lecturer seemed to like it that way as he held me a bit more tightly and devised a different style of dancing while remaining in one spot. I think it was too much for him, for he said: “Flora, are you a bit tired?”

I ignored him.

“Oh, well if you feel a bit tired or sleepy I could take you outside. It's rather stuffy in here.”

I nodded. My tactics had failed.

We made our way through the dancers.

Some of them moved as much as stumps of trees would. Indeed, some of them were knotted together, not moving at all. And they disliked the disturbance we made. As we edged our way through, Simon caught my eye and winked at me. I returned the 'hello' with a slight smile. We managed, in the end, to reach the garden. As we approached the seats, a young man intercepted us.

“Sorry, Mr Ruhu. I want to speak to this lady,” he addressed Mr Ruhu.

“By all means, Steve. Go ahead.” Ruhu went away, and I was left alone with this stranger. I followed Mr Ruhu with my eyes, and then looked up at the sky which was brighter. The moon had covered a good distance in the eastern sky, and more stars had uncovered their smiles since we arrived.

“I have been watching you right from the time you arrived here.”

“Oh, well?” I could not hide the surprise on my face, I believe, let alone a tremor in my voice. He gave me that kind dominating masculine smile, and then held my hands.

“I must say that I like you,” he continued. I kept quiet. I did not know what to say to such an impressive, handsome young man. I only wished that he could go on speaking to me, for his voice was rich, gentle and firm. The man was confident and I wished he could eat me up as he ran his eyes all over me.

“I'm sure I'll love you if you give me a chance,” he said. “But one thing. Get out of this place. I don't think you are safe here. Get out of this place, dear. I've just overheard and seen two men talking about you, right there. Go home.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, stupefied.

“Look, young lady. What is your name by the way?”

“Flora.”

“Go home, Flora. Get out of this place quickly. Ask whoever brought you here to take you home. I saw two men outside this very house and I didn't like what they said about you. I saw them enter a sort of smallish, cream car. Go home.”

“Cream car?” I gasped with fear.

“Looked like it,” he said.

This must be Tom or Kit, I convinced myself. What did they want here? It must be jealousy which brought them here, and jealousy can cause death easily.

“Do you know them?” he asked with interest.

“Who are you? What is...”

“Never mind what I am. But my name is Steve. Only take this address of mine if you care to know who I am. That's not important now. Just go home.” He handed me his address.

I looked into his face, and I saw he was especially handsome, with a serious face that would comfort any woman. I wished I could touch his strong mouth. Some moments later Mike appeared and came straight to us. I told him that I was feeling unwell and that I wanted to go home.

“Oh yes. I was, as a matter of fact, looking for you. This is for you from Simon. He told me you fixed your appointment for tomorrow.” He handed me Simon's address.

“Hello, sir. Are you the one who brought Flora here?” Steve asked.

“Yes. Do you want to dance with her?”

“No. Not that. I would if she could. But that's not important now.”

“What is important now?” Mike asked a bit roughly. “Flora seems to have a big market, I'm beginning to pinch myself.”

“Thank you. Just one thing. Take her home. And safely too. She is my girlfriend,” Steve said seriously.

“Oh, I see. I'll do that, sir. Well, I should apologise for bringing her here without your permission. But I should warn you that Flora is my niece and you'll have to be careful whatever you say in front of me.” Mike told the lie and looked at me. I think I hated him.

I felt like crying when I heard these men claiming me. Are women born to be claimed like cattle? For Mike to claim me as his niece was ridiculous. He had just seen my nakedness. And for Steve to claim me as his girlfriend was just absurd. But I would not have minded him being my boyfriend. The problem was that he was not and he seemed to be too good for me. I had fallen for him. My resistance to men had collapsed the first time I met a man. I began to wish he was my boyfriend. How could I get him to be mine? And what would happen to Tom? My problems were beginning to make themselves apparent.

“Look sir,” Steve said. “I don't think she is safe here; there are two men chasing her. I've just seen them here. So please drive cautiously as you go home. And, to be frank, I don't care whether you are her uncle or not. My concern is that she is safe... whether girlfriend or not. She looks like a girl who can be useful to the world. That's my concern,” Steve said as he looked at me. His bright eyes pierced my heart and wrote the word 'love' there. I was in love already.

“Take me home, Mike,” I said worriedly. “Thank you Steve. I'll not forget you, sir”.

“It's all right. I'm sure we shall meet again. Say goodbye to Mr Ruhu before you go,” Steve said seriously and then left me. I went to say goodbye to Mr Ruhu who gave me his address and promised to help me if I wanted. I really did not know what I wanted. Was it a job I wanted or was it Steve now? I got confused. There I was, a single girl in the hands of strangers... all of them claiming me in one way or the other.

“Let's go,” Mike said huskily. We drove home quietly. We said nothing on the way. My mind was busy working on what I had seen at the party. The party had been good. Full of events. All the men I met were interesting and admirable. All of them helpful or ready to help me. All of them looked rich and educated. But all of them were strangers. Worse still, men. Nevertheless, I wished I could meet Steve again.

**Chapter Three**

Six days after the party at the university, I received a note from Tom “Dear Flora, I hope yee are fine. Let's meet today at the Comfort Bar. I have good news for yee about yar job. Until we meet, remain good. Years ever, Tom.” It was brief. Characteristic of him. I remember complaining on many occasions that his letters were rather too short. But his replies always were: “I have no time, yee know. I'm always running around on business.” Business or not, I did not like the short letters. My friends used to receive long letters from their boyfriends telling them all sorts of stories. Surely, Tom could afford writing much longer and more interesting letters.

When I received the note, my mind took me back to the incident at the party. I recollected all that Steve told me about the two men talking ill of me, and their smallish, cream car. Did Tom want to ask me what I was doing at the party with men? Did he really have good news for me or was it just a trap? Maybe he had got me a job.

The day after the party at the university, I went to see Mr Simon Lupoi. I followed his instructions and found his office in a tall building. In front of the building was written in big letters: “National Glassworks - Headquarters.” His office was on the fourth floor. I entered the reception hall, and a beautiful, smiling young woman asked me to sit down. The room was almost overcrowded.

“Can I see Mr Lupoi?” I asked her.

“Please, sit down and feel at home. Everyone here wants to see him.”

“Thank you, madam.”

“Do you have an appointment?” she asked.

“Yes, madam. He told me to come and see him today,” I answered. Everyone else looked at me, and then quickly looked away again.

“May I know your name, please?”

“Flora.”

“Flora who?”

“Flora Wangu.”

She wrote the names down and then disappeared into the inner room. Near me sat boys and girls of my age, all waiting to see Mr Lupoi. I guessed that they also wanted jobs. Some of them were reading newspapers glueing their eyes on advertisements for jobs. One of the boys flipped through the pages of the newspaper and then concentrated on a heading which read: “The Education Minister Warns Students”. It caught my eye. It went on. “The Minister explained to the National Association of Students that the pass mark for entry to university has been raised. One should have five good credits at O-level and two principal passes at A-level in order to be admitted to university. Students must work very hard.” The boy laughed nervously after reading the message and said: “Stupid. I think the university thing is out. I'll join the army.” He looked at me and then smiled. “How can one possibly get five credits when there are no teachers in schools? They are running their small businesses.”

I kept quiet but got the message.

How could one pass the examinations without any preparation for them? But then, the current question was not to pass examinations. All I wanted was a job, and my hopes depended on Mr Lupoi's words.

“Miss Wangu,” the receptionist said, “Follow me please.” I stood up hurriedly and some boys appeared embarrassed by my unlady-like behaviour. I followed the woman who ushered me into Mr Lupoi's office.

“Good morning, Flora. Sit down.”

“Good morning, sir.”

“You kept the appointment. Good.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, the thing is I'm terribly busy and I can't make a decision now.” He looked at me, and I almost cursed him for wasting my time. “But, the job for you is available. What you can do is to wait for a week from today and then come back.”

“Thank you, sir.” I was excited.

“But we shall talk about it outside the office. You know, one feels too busy, and sometimes one fails to help young people like you because of these four walls.”

He said pointing to green-washed walls surrounding us.

“Thank you, sir.”

“So, go home and read your books. You are guaranteed a job... if you see what I mean.”

“Yes, sir. Thanks, sir.” I left the room very happy indeed. So getting a job was so easy! New vigour flowed into me, and I walked briskly and confidently in the city I looked forward to the day when Simon would say, “There you are, you'll be working here and your salary will be so much.”

So, when I received a note from Tom about my job, I did not feel as excited as I should have because I had another promise from somewhere else. Tom was my boyfriend and had his own business, but then Simon looked as if he could help me much more quickly.

At any rate, I went to the Comfort Bar as I had been requested by Tom and found him with Kit already drinking. The bar was buzzing with a mixture of music from a jukebox and voices from customers. People looked happy and it seemed their gods had been pleased with their deeds. People look happy in bars. I don't know why.

“How are yee, Flora?” Tom called out.

“I'm fine. How are you Kit?”

“Very fit, my dear. You have lost weight, what is happening to you?” Kit asked.

“I don't know!”

“She's worried about exams. But even if she fails she won't be the first one!” Kit laughed.

“Now, look, don't frighten her. She likes passing exams so much that ye may make her run mad by that simple joke,” Tom said seriously.

“Then, what will you do if you fail?” Kit laughed again and looked into my face directly.

“I don't know,” I replied again.

“Oh, com'on Kit. Don't frighten the little dear,” Tom said and then faced me. “I have yar news. Good news, so far.”

“Oh tell me then Tom.” I showed interest.

“But one thing before I tell yee.” He looked at me seriously. The interest I had shown evaporated. “We happened to meet yar sister sometime back, and she told us that Mike took yee to a party at the university to look for jobs.”

I felt a cold shiver along my back down to my seat. What could I say? Were they going to beat me? But my sister could not possibly have told them that for she was a very difficult woman to extract a word from. Of course they had seen me at the party. Steve was right. Maybe they had followed us, me and Mike, up to my sister's house.

“Yes. He wanted to introduce me to some of his friends who would help me.”

“Did he introduce ye to any?” Tom asked. I kept quiet. “Now Flora, we mean no harm. We just want to know,” Kit said.

“Yes, yes,” I stammered.

“Are they going to help you?” Kit asked.

I kept quiet. I was getting scared. If I said yes, they would ask me whether they were not helping me enough, and if I said no they would probably rebuke me for going there anyway.

“Now Flora,” Tom pleaded. “Don't ye begin thinking that we are jealous or what. We just want to know whether they agreed to help yee, so that we can go and see them... to speed things up. Yee never know, maybe those guys are known to us.”

I kept quiet.

“By the way, who are they?” Kit asked.

“All right,” I said angrily. “One is a manager.”

“Yes?” Tom asked.

“His name is Simon.”

“Simon who?”

“Simon Lupoi.”

“With a Peugeot 504?”

“I don't know. I don't know his car. He is the manager of National Glass Works.”

“I know him. He drives a Renault 16, and sometimes a Baby Fiat. His wife's, I suppose,” Kit said.

“Who else was introduced to yee?”

“A-a-a... Mr Ruhu.”

“Mr Ruhu?”

“Yes. He is a lecturer at the university.”

“And he can give yee a job?” Tom wondered.

“I don't know. He is a funny man,” I laughed, and they laughed too.

“Do yee know that funny lecturer, Kit?” Tom asked.

“Of course not. I would rather save my knowledge for other more important things.” Kit laughed.

A latrine fly buzzed over our glasses and almost fell into my beer. Kit swept his hand over the glasses to ward off the fly.

It dodged the hand and buzzed off to other customers.

“Flora,” Tom said, “when are you going to see your manager?”

“I have already seen him.”

“And he gave you the job” said Kit.

“No. He said I should go back next week. He was very busy.”

“Oh, we all wish you the best. I'm sure he will help you,” Kit said.

“Well, I hope I'll get it. I mean, it doesn't matter whether I get it or not... because you are giving me all I want.”

“One small thing, though,” said Tom. “Make sure that ye inform us when yee're going to see him so that we can help yee.”

“We would like to meet him, too,” Kit said.

The music from the jukebox blared on. It was becoming too noisy to be enjoyed. I suggested that we could perhaps go to another bar, next door.

“Oh well, I can see yar reason, but yee see we're waiting for some guys who will take ye to the man we wanna yee to see,” Tom said and swallowed a mouthful of beer.

“To see?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“About the job?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, wonderful! Who is he, or what is he?”

“Well, the thing is this, Flora. We contacted a certain *mzungu* on your behalf to give you a job. He agreed, but he wants to see you first. Do you understand, eh?” Kit explained.

“Yes.”

“So tonight you are going to see him.”

“Good! Is he coming here, in this bar?”

“No,” Tom answered curtly. I did not know why.

“At his home,” Kit explained.

“At his home? Why not his office?” I asked, and Tom stood up and walked into the toilet.

“Well, look here young girl. You have just got to understand the world today. How many girls flock to offices looking for jobs? Do you think all of them get the jobs? Very few. Very few indeed. And even those very few ones get them by using their heads. You can't get a job from an office, but you can get one more easily from a bedroom. Do you understand?” Kit said seriously.

“No.”

“Well, you go to the *mzungu's* house, enter his bedroom and get your job. Simple as that.”

“But Tom...”

“Tom, well. Tom is a man of the world and he understands. If only one night can help you get a job, what's wrong with that?”

I kept quiet. Tom joined us again and looked at his watch. He looked at me and then looked away. He stretched his legs under the table on which our beers stood and still said nothing. He looked at his watch again, stood up, and walked out. Well, I thought, if I could get a job so easily, why not accept? A cup of determination filled my chest and I heard myself saying 'yes' right deep inside me.

“So now get ready,” Kit continued. “Tomorrow is Sunday after all, and so you don't have to worry about going to school.”

“I know,” I said with a tremor in my voice. I felt frightened for I had never visited a *mzungu.*

“When he is happy with you, then he'll help you.”

“But that's too much! Is Tom tired of me? He no longer wants me?”

“Why?”

“Why is he sending me to a *mzungu*?”

“Well you can see that he is disturbed and worried about it all. And that's why he has gone away. He is only doing this for your love.”

“But why can't you employ me in your business? You said you had a business.”

“Yes, we could if you want to. But you wanted to work with the Airways. Can't you see we are trying our best to give you what you want most?”

I kept quiet. The whole thing, after a moment of thought looked normal. I became convinced that they were helping me and the idea of working with the Airways cooled me down.

“But do you know something, Kit?”

“No I don't.”

“I don't like *wazungu*.”

“Nor do I.”

“I mean, they smell.”

“Everybody does.”

“And... And...”

“And what?”

“They waste time.”

“They waste time? Whose time?”

“They waste time!” I laughed.

“Oh I see, you mean playing first, and... and... touch touch..?”

“Yes. And I don't know how to kiss and kiss, and say nothing.”

“Now, don't talk to me like that; you know how it hurts to hear that. You'll keep quiet, won't you?”

“I'm sorry Kit. I was only joking. You know I love Tom.”

We kept quiet, and drank our beers. After some minutes, a man came to us and whispered to Kit. Kit, in turn, told me that we should finish off the drinks and go away. We walked out of the bar after drinking our beers, and found a Datsun car parked in front of the bar. Kit told me that was the car to take me to the *mzungu.* The skin jumped off my head when I heard that. There were two men seated in the car, and as we approached it, one of them got out and opened a door for me. I entered and sat in the rear, alone.

“Be a good girl,” Kit whispered to me. I smiled.

“Take her safely,” Kit said to the two men. “If anything happens to her on the way, you will certainly regret it.”

“She's safe, of course,” the driver shouted and drove off. We drove in silence for about seven or ten minutes until the driver said: “I think there is something wrong in the car.”

“Something wrong?” the second man asked.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Here, in the car.”

I shivered; that shiver you get when you are about to step on a coiled snake.

“What do you mean?” the second man asked.

“Either there is no petrol in the tank or there is something wrong with the engine.”

“Carburettor?”

“Anything. Carburetor, points, plugs. I don't know you see!”

“What do we do now?”

The driver kept quiet.

“What shall we do if it stops?”

“Well, it has stopped.” The driver gave a nervous laugh.

The car coughed and then stopped. I grew frightened.

The second man got out of the car and opened the bonnet.

“Hey,” he said, “I think we shall need a screwdriver or something.”

“Get it,” the driver shouted at him.

I sat quietly, terrified.

“Where is it? Pass it to me, you lazy fish.”

“Get it yourself. It is in the back seat. I'll come and see where it is.”

I froze with fear. I looked around. Why should the screwdriver be in the back seat, of all places? The second man opened the door to the back seat.

“Sorry to disturb you, madam.”

“It's all right,” I lied. It was not all right with me. I had a funny feeling about the whole thing. He lit a torch and began searching for whatever he was searching for.

“How far are we going?”

“It's still far off,” he said curtly.

I began to curse Tom and Kit. Why did they not take me to the *mzungu*themselves? Why had they trusted these two men? Perhaps they knew one another. I pushed myself into the corner of the seat and folded myself into a ball the best I could. I felt frightened of something I could not give a name to. The man went on searching. All of a sudden, he switched off the lights and then flickered the torch into my face.

“Oh no!” I protested.

“What?” he said.

“The torch.”

“You don't like it? I'll switch it off.”

He did so.

The driver banged the bonnet and got back into the car. He started the engine and drove off.

“Oh, don't touch!” I protested as the second man touched my thighs.

“Don't be silly.”

“I'm not silly. Take your hands off me!” I shouted, but the man took no heed. He went on touching me everywhere. In no time, he wrapped his strong arm around my waist and squeezed me hard. He overpowered me and drew a short painful kiss from me.

“You are a rat!” I cried.

“No, I'm a cat and you are a rat.”

“What are you doing behind there, you pig?” the driver asked the second man.

“He is troubling me. Please help me,”' I cried.

“Well, that's not my business I am a driver. I shall drive on and on until I reach where I'm going.”

“Do you hear? Be sensible,” the second man said and struggled with my underwear.

“Beat her if she proves a nuisance,” the driver said. I felt helpless when I heard that. These men had planned the whole thing.

“I'll beat you.”

“Let's kill her,” the driver suggested.

“Oh! Oh! No! No!”

“Right. Settle down. Do what I say.”

“What do you want with me?”

He slapped me, and I cried like a child left out in the rain. He held me by the neck and slapped me again.

“Let us kill her,” the driver said again.

“Do you want us to kill you?” the second man asked me. I felt helpless. What could I do? Fight on and resist? I thought hard, but tears drowned my concentration. I wished I could get hold of the driver's head and twist it and twist it again. We could bang into something, and perhaps all of us would die. I did not mind dying at that moment. I was desperate. The man was too strong for me and overpowered me. I was like a baby in his hands.

“Why don't you kill me?” I cried.

“Why, you'll get that soon if you don't cooperate. You can't pretend you are a virgin. And that *mzungu* waiting for you is a man like us.”

I cried and cried. The mention of 'not a virgin' reminded me of that fateful day and I felt hopeless. I was a woman. A plaything for men. So let it be.

These men were rough and could kill. Sex to them was more important than life. The brute raped me before I could decide what to do.

I do not think I will ever forgive them. I began to curse Tom and Kit. Why did they get me involved in such an affair? The job? I hated everybody. Most of all, I hated myself. “Why, why me, of all people, to be involved in this?” I cried, and the driver drove on around the city with no destination.

The car stopped somewhere in a solitary part of the city and the second man jumped out of the car and joined the driver in the front seat.

“If you tell anybody about this we shall kill you. Just like that.” He snapped two fingers to illustrate how easily they could take my life. I cried but then crying itself could not help. Maybe I had grown too big for the consolation of tears. I calmed myself and only hoped that he had not infected me with the 'disease'.

Later, we drove off quietly. Nobody said a word. I cursed myself that I had ever been born. Quickly, we left the city and headed for the suburbs.

The road was deserted as if our car carried leprosy with it and nobody wanted to meet us. But the quiet drive was refreshing, and the cool moonlight brought peace to my mind. All the same I could not forget the nasty experience I had just undergone. We drove on and on. We passed by several houses enclosed with hedges. I now remember the hedges and begin to wonder whether they could provide security to the people in those houses. Security? A mere word, I think. A rare thing in practice. The world has grown too small to be secure. Our enemies are stronger and wiser. Maybe the hedges were to provide beauty. Beauty? Yes, another word that depends on our eyes. But do we see the same thing at the same time? Are our eyes capable of seeing beauty and recognising it as such? Well, I don't know. But if you ask me, our eyes are overworked. They are overloaded. There is malice in them. Greed and hatred are full-time tenants of our eyes. Most lamentable of all, there is that despicable tenant called fear. Look into the face of your neighbour and you will see fear glaring in his or her eyes. Fear of the present; and of the future. Never mind the past.

“I hope Mzee is still up,” the driver broke the silence.

“He must be. He likes women so much that he can't sleep before he gets his kill,” the second man said with laughter in his voice.

“He can't do without them as some people can't do without salt,” the driver said.

Soon, we arrived at a house surrounded with trees and shrubs. When the car stopped, the front door opened and a *mzungu* came out to the car.

“Aaa, I told you. He can't sleep before he sees one.” They laughed. I bit my lip and told myself not to cry, for a woman is born to face such. So I thought then.

“It took you a long time, what happened?” the *mzungu* asked.

They came out of the car, laughing. I stayed in.

“I thought you had met with an accident,” the *mzungu* said as he helped me out of the car.

“No, sir,” said the driver. “No accidents.”

“Not at all, Mzee,” confirmed the second man. “This is the usual time.”

“I know,” the *mzungu* nodded. “How are you, young lady?”

“Fine,” I hissed.

“Feeling cold?” he asked. The other men laughed. I hated them. “Come on in. It is quite warm inside. And you two.” He addressed the men.

“No, sir. We are going,” the driver said.

“We have done our part,” the second man said.

“We only want the other things!” the driver coughed.

“Oh, definitely. You deserve a prize.”

The *mzungu* said warmly as he pulled money out of his hip pocket and gave it to them.

“Thanks, Mzee,” the driver said happily.

“Thank you, Papa!” the second man said. “And remember we are at your service any time you want us.”

“Oh yes. Of course, my friends. Be assured I shall need your help very soon,” he laughed.

“Good night Mzee,” the driver said as he started the engine.

“Enjoy yourself,” the second man said.

“Good night my friends.” I hated them the more. He kept quiet. “Oh, come in. I'll open it for you. This door sometimes is unfriendly.”

I entered the house. I looked around and sighed with awe. The house was very impressive, very richly furnished.

“Sit anywhere, anywhere, my dear.”

I kept quiet and hesitated. I had never seen such beautiful chairs in my life.

“May I know your name again?”

“Flora, sir.”

“That's a good name. Sit down please. That's a very good name. You know what it means?”

I shook my head. Words refused to come.

“You don't know what your name means? You must be a funny sweet thing.”

“No, sir,” I said gazing away at some pieces of furniture.

“Shall I mix you a drink?” he said as he walked to a sideboard. He was an elderly man. Perhaps in his late fifties or early sixties. A bald patch swept from his forehead right to the back of the head. The rest of the head was sparsely covered with greying hair which looked plastered on the egg-like skull. He looked muscular, and his walk was firm and strong... despite his age. He talked entirely as a school teacher would to a promising student.

“You don't know your name, Flora?” he said as he brought the drinks. I kept quiet and watched him. “Sorry I didn't ask you what you drink. This is just Scotch with a lemon slice on top. I'm sure it'll warm you up.”

“Thank you, sir.” I wanted to refuse it, but what purpose could it serve?

“Your name, Flora, has got connections with plants.”

“Plants?”

“Yes. Plants my dear. Your name means plants of a particular area collectively.”

I kept quiet. I had not understood.

“It reflects a sign of life. A certain beauty of nature. In fact, plants are the source of our lives, aren't they Flora?”

I nodded.

“Because we eat them; animals, or rather some animals, and insects depend on them and we depend on those animals as well.”

“Yes,” I agreed. I began to wonder whether I had come to listen to such lessons. Was it another classroom or what?

“Come to think of it, it is true. Your name fits you. For you are beautiful. As beautiful as nature. A source of relaxation and happiness.”

I smiled and looked away. His fluency was beginning to mesmerise me, and he had a particular way of half-winking which could pass amorous messages across better than other devices I knew of then.

He shifted from where he was sitting and sat quite close to me. His hairy, strong rounded arms rubbed against mine and I began to feel ticklish.

“You see that painting over there?”

“Which one?”

“That one above the piano.”

“Yes.”

“It's all about Flora,” he said smiling.

I looked at the painting, but did not see anything particularly interesting. I forced a smile.

“Come. Take a close look. Not that close though. Come.”

We walked together to the middle of the room.

“Can you see it better now?” he asked as he put his arm around my waist.

“Yes, I see. It is beautiful,” I lied.

“That's good. It's beautiful. True. It's part of the flora of Congo. I mean Zaire. May God bless me! These African names keep on changing. It seems there's no sense of permanence in this part of the world. Well, on the right is the beginning of the other town, Lumumbashi or whatever they call it these days. Anyhow, formerly Stanleyville.” He explained as he held me tightly and now and then he would reach for my breasts, at which I would squirm away.

“It's beautiful,” I said.

“Yes it is, Flora is beautiful,” he grinned and some of his teeth reflected more light than others.

“What about the other painting?”

“No. That's not a painting really. It is a photograph. Come along. Let us see it more closely.” We walked to the wall together. The photograph was on a wall above a reading desk. I took a close look with interest. Photographs attracted me more than paintings.

“This is you?”

“Yes, you are right,” he ran his hand along my back.

“This is... your wife?”

“Yes, she was,” he said quietly.

“She was?” I asked doubtfully.

“She is no longer. She passed away,” he said and looked away.

“I'm sorry.”

“This one is my son,” he pointed to a young man in the photo. I looked at him and kept quiet.

“Where is he now? England?”

“No, not England. It should be Scotland. I'm not English I am a Scotsman.”

“I see.”

“He is in Colombo, Ceylon.”

“I see.” I craned forward to have a closer look.

As I looked, he quickly held me from behind and squeezed me tightly. I lost control of the glass in my hand and it crashed to the carpet, contents and all.

“Never mind that,” he breathed hard.

I made no resistance. He carried me to his bedroom, as if he had to.

“Sorry the way I'm behaving,” he said.

I said nothing. I placed myself on his hard chest, as hard as a grinding stone. Whitish grey hair covered it to make it look like the face of a drum. The tough hair pricked my breastfold and I liked the sensation. He whispered and held me more tightly. The difference in our age and skin dissolved in the painful silence of lust and passion. We struggled with each other in mutual excitement, and then our efforts snapped all of a sudden into weak groans of satisfaction. Exhaustion, like a gentle tide, overtook me and covered my body.

“Flora, this job of yours. When do you want to begin?”

I jumped with anxiety. I wanted to hear it again. Had I heard well?

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“When will you be available for the job?”

“After my exams.”

“That's December?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then that's OK. There are a few things to finalise, but I guess we shall do that tomorrow.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said excitedly.

I felt happy and grateful to Tom. I forgave him for the rape I had got in the car. He did not know it would happen. He was a good man. He only wanted me to get the job, and I had got it! To work in the Airways! I began to count the weeks left to the time I would begin working.

“We had better get to sleep, Flora. Soon it'll be dawn.”

I sank my head into a pillow and fell asleep. It was around four o'clock when we were aroused from our silent sleep by hard knocks on the nearest window. My *mzungu* man jumped out of the bed as if bounced by springs, and I could not figure out what it was that had been the cause. The knocking went on followed by voices calling out.

“Mzee! Mzee! Mzee!”

“What is it?” the *mzungu* shouted.

“Mzee! Mzee!”

“Who is there?”

“Paskari.”

“What is it, Paskari?”

“Mzee! Mzee!”

“What is it, Paskari?”

“The car.”

“The car? What about it?”

“Taken. They have taken it.”

“What? The car? My car?” the *mzungu* shouted as he stampeded out of the room.

I sat up in the bed and cocked my ears to catch every word. On the wall opposite me, I saw a photograph of a woman. I could not recognise it at first. I peered at it to see it more clearly, and what did I see? The other woman. The woman I had seen in the photograph which was in the sitting room; his wife. His dead wife. She looked at me with clear unblinking eyes. They might have been blue or green or some colour common in white women. That colour of strangeness. The colour that would send my mother away, cursing whoever created the albino.

I sprang out of the bed as if I had seen a ghost. I think I screamed. I do not remember. I think I did. I don't care what I did. But I could still hear someone's words from outside.

“You saw them? When was it taken?”

“Ten minutes ago or so.”

“Oh no!”

“Yes, sir. That's true.” It was Paskari's voice.

“You saw them?”

“No. I heard the sound of the engine, as it made off.”

I joined them outside.

“Get inside Flora,” he shouted. “It's too cold for you outside.”

Paskari gazed at me as if he could not believe I was there. I did not know why. But I do know now. He looked at me as if I was a trespasser. His face told me so. I wish I could meet him again. I'm sure he could tell me why he looked at me in that questioning manner.

“Ten minutes ago? You are sure?” the *mzungu* asked. How awkward he was enslaved to time, and the knowledge of it!

“Call the police,” I suggested.

“Oh yes. That's it. Thanks Flora. I'm rather too confused to do anything.” He was running everywhere.

“No hope,” Paskari said. “I tried my extension but I couldn't get through.”

“What?”

“I suspect the wires are cut,” Paskari said.

“Oh hell!”

“O lu... lu... lu... lu!” Paskari raised the alarm.

“Stop that silly thing, Paskari. Stop it!”

“Lu...lu...lu...lu...lu...lu!,” Paskari continued.

I joined him. We raised the alarm together now. The *mzungu* went into the house and I did not know what for. Maybe he did not want us to behave like that!

A few minutes later, we saw a vehicle coming and another *mzungu*stepped out when the car stopped. He asked us what had happened and we told him the story. Before we had finished telling the story, my host came to us.

“Oh it's you, John. They took my car. The problem is we can't contact the police. I suppose the wires are cut.”

“That's very tricky,” the other *mzungu* said. “Come on. Let's try mine. I hope it's not cut, too.” They drove away.

I went into the house, entered the bed and tried to sleep. I did not switch on the lights for fear of the unblinking eyes from the shadows. I tried to sleep but I could not. Sleep had fallen from my eyes like a leaf off a branch of a plant. That night I did not sleep again.

My *mzungu* man did not come back as soon as I had expected. I waited until two in the afternoon. Paskari had gone away also, presumably to assist his master in retrieving the car. I was in the house all alone. The house was too big for me and I felt as if I was in a cave. My heart sank with the weight of despair and I decided to go away, immersed in crippling disappointment

### Chapter Four

It was exactly two weeks after we had done our School Certificate examinations and I was still unemployed. After the incident at the *mzungu's*place, I hated myself so much that I erased the idea of getting a job from my mind. I did not bother to go back and see him nor did I care to find out what had happened to his car. I kept to myself and my sister was getting worried about my sudden change. Tom kept away from me too, but he wrote to me regularly saying that he was busy with the business. Frankly, I was beginning to hate men. The experiences I had had on the way to the *mzungu's* place showed me the not-too-good side of them.

There is another incident which made me abhor men and lose respect for them. The man who injured my respect was Mr Lupoi. I shall tell you the story briefly. You remember we had made an appointment to meet one day so that we could talk about my job outside his office. Tom and Kit knew of the appointment.

So, on that day, we met in the city, several blocks from his office. It was in the evening, but the day was still warm. Everybody was rushing home or somewhere after working hours. And when I entered his car, we joined the stream of vehicles as if we were on a pilgrimage.

Mr Lupoi was smartly dressed in a dark suit and his good appearance showed that he had taken care of it.

“You are extremely smart, Flora.”

“Am I? Thank you, sir.”

“Yes, you are smart,” he smiled.

“There are many girls here who are smarter,” I said. “Like your secretary.”

“Oh, is she? You know I don't usually look at her in that way!” He laughed.

“Well, she is.”

“How is Mike?”

“Hm...m...he should be fine.”

“It seems you have gone a long time without seeing him.”

“Yes. Some weeks,” I said.

“I see.”

I kept quiet.

“How were your exams?”

“I don't know.”

“I hope you'll pass.”

“I hope so too.”

He said nothing. I said nothing. My respect for men was beginning to grow thin. All I wanted from him was a job. Nothing else. But I felt frightened of something. I touched my side where the heart is and there it was knocking hard against the ribs. I did not know why. Mr. Lupoi drove on until we reached one of the best hotels in the city. He asked me to get out and explained that we were going to see what was in the hotel. The whole thing reminded me of that day when I met Tom. I began to wonder why men like to take women to hotels or bars.

We entered the hotel but, instead of going to the bar, we went straight to a room. The whole affair became clear to me. Here was another man who wanted to use me simply because I wanted a job. I wanted to say 'no' but sometimes it is difficult to say that small word. Mr Lupoi had an engaging personality which many women would find difficult to avoid. He was a gentleman, though with a bit of western mentality and sometimes he became unbearable. He would say 'sorry' so many times at slight, ignorable mistakes. And his accent was rather too anglicised. But on the whole, he was a likeable character.

We entered the room, and sat down. He ordered drinks which I took as if I was punishing him. I wanted him to spend on me. I felt I was getting smarter and smarter, and every minute I became less able to resist his meaningful smiles. I began to fear that I might like him too soon.

“How about my job?” I introduced the topic rather mechanically as if I was bargaining... which perhaps was true.

“Your job is guaranteed,” he said and squeezed my hands, which I took to reflect growing excitement. However, inside me there rose a battalion of emotions revolting against the ways of men.

“Are you married?” I asked.

“What do you think?”

“I don't think these days,” I giggled.

“Why? Because you have finished your exams?” I giggled again. “Now, suppose you pass, won't you go for further studies?”

“It will be a miracle.”

“Miracles happen.”

“Not with me,” I snapped.

“Well, let's wait and see.” He said nothing, but began to do something silly. I was getting drunk I think, but still I could see he was undressing. I looked away and then said: “I'm feeling unwell,” I stammered, trying to lift my tongue which was already heavy and too big in the mouth. When I looked at him again he was almost as naked as a new born child. Mr Lupoi, the manager of National Glassworks was naked in front of me. When I saw him like this, my feminine pride came back to me, and I wanted to tease him. Teasing is a weapon of the weak. I wanted to torture him by teasing him.

“Now, don't waste time,” he said, impatiently. I sulked, and looked away. I sat on a chair and looked at him drunkenly. The poor man was getting desperate, and he cut a funny figure in his near-nudity. I laughed at him. An important man, probably married, begging for me. Me, just a school-leaver with nothing in life except sex. Yes, sex!

He approached me, and knelt in front of me so that his face could be at the same level as mine.

Whatever the reason for his kneeling, I began to curse all the pride of men which dissolves into nothingness at the mere sight of femininity. There I was, me, Flora, seated like a queen, enjoying the admiration of and honour from this manager, poor man. Mr Lupoi was no longer the manager of so and so company. No. He was there as a man in his true self. A slave to sex.

But as I sat watching him, the whiskies I had gulped were working on me effectively. A slight push from him made me helpless and an hour later I found it rather too late.

The filmy part of the story comes in here. When we left the hotel, the first words from Mr Lupoi were not words to hear every morning.

“My God, my car isn't here!” he said stupidly. I do not think I will forget those words... full of surprise, despair and self-pity. But then, it was true. His car was nowhere to be seen. It had been stolen, He ran everywhere shouting “My car! My car! My car! Stolen! Stolen!” Within no time, many people had gathered around, some gazing, some shouting, some laughing and some sympathising. The police was alerted, and other sorts of advice were given to him. A shrill voice pierced through and said: “You'll be lucky if the police get it.” Others laughed, and nobody opposed him.

“Where's the man?” one man asked.

“Which man?”

“Whose car was stolen?”

“Him. What will he do now?” another man asked.

“Walk. He will walk home like most of us.” Some other people shouted laughing.

But Simon ran about shouting “Thieves! Thieves!” And everybody else looked at him. They said many words; the words that could not help him. He was in his own tragedy. Nobody could share the loss of his car with him. Nobody. Not even myself who had shared some excitement with him.

He was an individual, as most of us are when reduced to a certain degree of suffering. The whole thing reminded me of the incident at the *mzungu's*place. I began to curse myself. Why me? Why me all the time? What sort of bad luck did I carry in my blood? I got confused. Totally confused. I still remember how I felt frozen with shame and dejection. However, one thing I always thanked Mr Lupoi for was that despite the confusion he remembered to escort me in a taxi to my sister's house. I had not the slightest idea of what I could have done in such great confusion. But still, my respect for men had gone down beyond the point of rescue.

So it was. The period of the final examinations had been rather too long. It had taken us about three weeks to go through the ordeal. I wrote the exams to the best of my ability, and without any distraction.

However, after some days of doing nothing, the days began to drag. I began to itch. I could not tolerate staying at home doing nothing. The days began to be too long and the nights were unbearable. I went to Mr Lupoi's office for about ten days consecutively but I could not find him there. One day I would be told that he had gone on a business safari. Another day I would be told that he was too busy to see anybody. One day I insisted that I should see him. His secretary advised me to write him a note and, maybe, he might remember me. I wrote it only to get a reply... “Sorry, the job is not available. The management has refused to recruit people without special and technical knowledge. Sorry, Flora. Simon.” By the time I finished reading the note, perspiration had covered my face down to my chin. Hurriedly, I mopped my face with a handkerchief and bit my lips. The taste of the sweat was like smoked salt. I raised my eyes from the note only to find the eyes of the secretary pinned on me. I pulled myself into a standing position, tore Mr Lupoi's note and scattered the pieces on the secretary's table. Without saying a word, I walked out of the office, dragging my legs as if they were not mine. “I'm sorry,” I heard the secretary say, and she laughed queerly, as if it was all my fault to trust men.

“Why don't you try the village?” one day my sister suggested.

I looked at her, surprised. How could she say such a thing? Me? To go to the village? To do what there? “I mean,” she said again, “why don't you go and see mother? She would like to see you, I'm sure.” Jane said it as if she had been reading my mind.

“I shall go sometime.”

“Well, it's up to you.”

I laughed nervously and continued to make up my face.

“You could help her, too,” she continued.

“With what?”

“Well, you are a grown-up girl. You know she would be happy to see you.”

“Are you fed up with me here?”

“No. Not that, Flo.”

“Then why do you want to send me away?” She kept quiet. “Why do you send me away, Jane?”

“Now look, Flo, there's no need to get angry with me. All I said was that if the city was no longer interesting, you could try village life for a change.”

“Is that all?” I spat out the words. She kept quiet. “Do you think I can fit in the village now? You think my hands can hold a hoe and dig? You think my eyes can stand the smoky kitchen in the village? I can't stand that gossip in the village.”

She kept quiet and continued doing her work. She was preparing lunch.

“I can't fit into village life now. I was not taught to fit in such places, and I don't think I am going to learn how to go back to the village now.” I fixed a wig on my head and, that done, I got hold of my handbag and walked out of the house.

“Are you going out?” Jane asked, worried.

“Yes.”

“Without food in your stomach?”

“I don't want to eat.”

“Who is taking you out? Tom?”

“Anybody!” I shouted back.

“Flo! Flo!” she called out, but I did not want to answer.

It was a Wednesday. I caught a taxi which took me to the heart of the city. I walked aimlessly in the city for some time, and then decided to go to the Post Office where I posted several letters to my friends. I wandered about in the building and the exercise did not give me any pleasure. I walked out and along the street and then entered a couple of shops. Nothing gave me satisfaction. Shop-boys searched me with inquisitive eyes and with their deceitful smiles. I walked out again to join a crowd of people along the pavement. I felt sheltered under that vague word 'people' that provided a sense of protection. I did not want to be an individual: it was very harsh to be an individual.

I visited a shoe shop to look at the recent fashions and I noticed that new fashions actually had arrived. I felt like buying a pair of shoes, but I did not have enough money. Immediately, my mind flashed to Tom and wished he was around to buy them for me. After that I headed to the nearest restaurant. My stomach was empty and I could hear drums beating inside there.

“Can we help you?” a waiter asked with a stiff bow.

“Yes please, give me the menu.” He brought it. “I want number thirty six and cold milk and water.”

Their dishes were numbered, unlike the food at home. Very impersonal. The names of food were actually in a language the customer would not understand. So, one just made an order hoping that one would be able to eat whatever food was brought. A gamble, like most things these days.

Later, food was brought and I began to eat. A leaf or two of cabbage, twenty beans or so and some peelings of potatoes. On top was a slice of meat, a mere mouthful. I ate slowly and thoughtfully. Many questions raced through my head, round and round like bats locked in a dark room. What could I do? Where could I go after the meal? Go home again? I dismissed the idea of going home straight away. There was nothing exciting at home. Could I roam the city looking for my former classmates? I missed them a lot. “Yes!” I decided to roam the city. They were in a similar situation, perhaps. We could console one another. The experiences we had shared together at school could unite us again, and we would be a big force against any enemy. The enemy in the form of redundancy. Doing nothing all the time. Loneliness. Yes, indeed, loneliness. Worse still, the lack of belonging.

We, the school leavers, lacked that sense of belonging. We no longer belonged to the school in which we were, nor did we belong to the world into which we had been spilt by time. We had just overflowed into a society we did not know; there was no preparation for us. Nobody cared to prepare us for such a society. We were not taught what to do whenever we looked for jobs and failed to get them. We could not go back to the village or the land as some Ministers liked to shout. For what was there to hold us? What was in the village to receive us? Where was a connecting relationship between us and the village? Parents? Yes. But the land? What is the land these days without money? Why were the Ministers themselves not going back to the land? What examples could they give us? Didn't they expect anybody else to get a job and get money too? How could one get money in the village? Selling food? To whom? At any rate, who expected me to go back to dig in the fields after all this trouble of reading so many books? And my sister also says... “Why can't you try the village!” I caught myself snarling.

“You don't seem to enjoy your food, Flora!” someone said to me. I started. It was Steve.

“Steve!” I shouted. I could not avoid it. Everybody around looked at us to find out the cause of the excitement.

“Flora,” he said firmly but warmly. He gave me that serious look, which is a combination of concern and warm feelings. I smiled; “You are lost. What happened?” he said as he pulled a chair close to me.

“I'm here!” I laughed.

He smiled.

I cleaned my mouth with a paper napkin, folded it neatly and put it on the half-eaten food. Steve had taken all my attention.

“Don't tell me you eat so little, Flora. You have hardly eaten anything.”

“I am all right,” I almost sang.

“Come on!” he said as he reached for the bill.

“I am all right really. I mean, I don't like food these days.”

“Have you paid for this already?”

“No, but you don't have to bother. I want to pay,” I said as I fidgeted with my handbag. But by the time I got the money out, he had paid the bill. I protested that he had paid for food he had not eaten.

“It's OK.” He smiled.

I looked at him with interest.

He was a very handsome young man, I must repeat. Well-composed and exceedingly charming. I was captivated by his dominating masculine features which gave a high percentage of sex appeal.

“How were your exams?”

“I don't know.”

“Well, I hope you'll get through.”

“By chance.”

“What are you doing with yourself these days?” he asked as he looked at another woman. I felt jealous as if he was my man.

“Nothing. I roam about.”

“No work?”

“No, not yet.”

“You mean someone has promised you a job?”

“Well, yes. But I'm not sure. They always tell me that it is difficult to get one these days, unless you know someone.”

“Don't you know someone?”

“I mean someone to help me.”

“Have you tried to look for one?”

“Yes. I started six months ago!” I laughed. He laughed, in sympathy. “And up to now nobody has helped me.”

“Maybe you go to the wrong people.” He smiled. I said nothing. He sounded correct.

Maybe I had gone to the wrong people. But how could one know that so and so was not a wrong person? To me, all men were wrong.

“As a matter of fact we were talking about you yesterday.”

“You and who?” I asked with interest.

“Mr Ruhu. You remember him?”

“Yes I do. I remember him. How is he? He is a funny man!” I giggled.

“He is not only funny, but also very helpful. Of course his carefree way of behaving might put you off.”

“I like him,” I said quickly. “Was he talking about me?”

“Yes, yes. We were wondering what exactly happened to you, because he gave you his address but you did not ask him for help.”

“I'm sorry. Actually I must apologise. I did not write to you either. Oh, it is a shame!” He smiled and said nothing. “I got involved with the exams. I'm really sorry. Do you think he can help now?”

“I don't know. But let's try. Do you have to go anywhere else now?”

“No. Nowhere.”

“Right. Let's go.” We went out of the restaurant together, and I felt a strangeness in me. I think I was happy.

We entered his Volkswagen car and rattled off to the university. I felt good; that kind of sweet feeling you get after reaching home with a pot of water you have fetched from a far-off well. To be seated near Steve was something like a favour. I must repeat that I loved him the first time I saw him. Ever since then I had been longing to meet him again. But as the weeks went by I almost lost hope of meeting him. I feared writing to him, for I thought he would not reply, and such a disappointment would cripple me. So as we drove together, I only wished that the university was hundreds of miles away.

“Flora.”

“Yes, please.”

“Do you remember when we first met?”

“Yes. At the party. It was good!”

“What was good?”

“The party. And the people too.”

“Did you arrive home safely?”

“Yes.”

“That's good. How is your uncle?” he asked casually as he changed gears.

“He should be fine.” I almost hissed with anger. I wished he had forgotten about Mike and his lies.

“It's good those men did not harm you that night. For they were planning to beat you up.”

“We arrived safely.”

He kept quiet.

“By the way, where do you work?” I plucked up courage.

“Diplomatic Service.”

“In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?” I asked again, trying to remember what it meant.

“Yes, the Foreign Service. I work in our office in Zaire.”

“Zaire?” I gasped with surprise as I remembered my *mzungu* man talking about the flora of Zaire. I wished I could see Zaire.

“You seem to like Zaire, Flora. Have you ever been there?”

“No, it's too far.”

“Is it?” he said absentmindedly and swerved the car into a parking area in front of a big building at the university.

“I'll check if he is in. Stay here.”

There were many people about and a stream of them kept on coming into and going away from the building. Most of them were students, I think. They carried books in their hands and others carried files. I envied them. Most of all, I envied their confident way of talking to one another.

“Let's go in. He is in,” Steve said, and I let out a sigh of relief. He led me to the place and ushered me into Mr Ruhu's office. Mr Ruhu was alone, writing so many things on a blackboard. Steve showed me where to sit and I sat.

“Sit down Flora,” Mr Ruhu shouted without looking at us. He kept on writing on the board. Steve smiled. I hid my smile in a handkerchief. Mr Ruhu went on writing for several minutes without giving us any attention. At the same time, he was talking to himself.

“That's it. That's it!” he shouted and turned to me. “You see!” He banged the book on the table.

“I don't,” Steve replied casually.

“You do. Or rather you should. You see! At the end of this century the world population will be nearing six thousand million people!” He dropped into the nearest chair and put his feet on a table.

“Eureka!” Steve shouted, mocking.

“Yes, this is no joke. Six thousand million bloody mouths to feed.”

“Yes?” Steve asked.

“And the bloody little Auntie Planet Earth will remain the same size she is now.”

“Even less.” Steve laughed.

I kept quiet.

“Big problem, big problem. And these millions of bloody Units will need jobs to keep them going.” He sighed.

Steve looked at me. I shivered.

“How are you Flora?” Mr Ruhu said.

“Fine, sir.”

“It is a problem to get a job these days. Especially temporary jobs,” Steve observed.

“Every job is temporary,” Mr Ruhu said.

“I mean jobs of this nature. Jobs which you get after looking for them. Looking for them literally.”

“Well, well, well. At one time it was extremely easy for a school-leaver to get a job. But now see what is happening. Even university graduates are finding it difficult to be absorbed as soon as they leave here. I don't know what we are coming to,” Mr Ruhu said as he smoked a pipe.

“I don't believe in this talk that there are too many graduates nowadays.”

“Who does?” Mr Ruhu laughed.

“I mean, quite often we hear that the university is producing rather too many for the jobs available.”

“I have not heard that, honestly,” said Mr Ruhu. “But what I have heard is that more universities are likely to be built. This obviously suggests that after sometime, there will be more graduates than there are today. And definitely, they will want to work. It is my sincere belief that there is a comprehensive plan for that. If there isn't then it must be done now.”

“Take the example of the developed countries,” Steve said. “There are so many universities in a single small country and there seems to be no sign of over-production of university graduates.”

“But you forget the total population of those small countries, and the high percentage of job opportunities in terms of industries and... and etc. Some of them get themselves jobs in the so-called developing countries as technicians, special advisers, international civil servants and in other ways.”

“Yes of course. But I believe there is something lacking in the planning of these universities,” Steve argued.

“Not only for universities, Steve. The whole system of education in most developing countries is tricky, if not false. The ideals are a bit strange to us. Sometimes unthinkable. And that is why we are finding it difficult to cope with these ensuing problems.”

“What do you mean?”

I looked on with interest.

“I will tell you.” He stood up and began to walk about in the room “I will tell you. This education system is very new to us. Very new indeed. Long ago, one would be born into a long established culture with customs to observe. One belonged to a family as well as in the immediate society throughout one's life. Free education was a guarantee. Every adult was a teacher and the village was a classroom. Every able-bodied person was a soldier. Learning was everywhere. Songs were sung. Poems were recited. Dances were danced and customs were observed in fields, gardening was taught and at home civics and domestic administration were offered. There was nothing formal about all this. Education was part of their lives. People just grew up with it. Children picked up what was expected of them by the community until they learnt the habit of living the life almost laid down for them. Today it is a different thing. There is the school. One goes to school and goes out into the world. To the outside world I say. And this is where and when the challenge comes in.”

I looked on with admiration.

“So what?” Steve shot back.

“So that we should accept the challenge and at least attempt to solve the problems. Look, most of us are born in rural areas. We are born amongst people who value traditional ethics. But before we know what our society is built on, we are hustled off to school where the belonging means something different.

“But, unfortunately, we do not stay in that community long enough either. For, after the school period, we are forced to join the outside world which happens to be different from the village community and the school community. Now, the sad thing is this. At this stage we know almost nothing about our traditions. And the values we acquire in schools, even universities, are not easily applicable to this outside world. And of course the village life is out of our minds. That is why you hear these young people saying that they can't fit in the village life... and rightly so!”

I smiled at him. He was supporting my views.

Steve looked at me and said nothing.

“Isn't it true Flora?” Mr Ruhu asked.

I nodded.

“At this stage of your life, Flora, you must be finding it rather difficult to balance the ideas of school and those of the village.” I said nothing.

“Well?” Steve sighed.

“Well indeed!” Mr. Ruhu shouted. “These young people need the utmost attention otherwise their character will get stunted. You see?”

“I don't,” Steve said stubbornly. I laughed.

“You don't, I know. What do you see? The non-alignment policy? Foreign aid, which actually is not aid at all? What do you see if you don't care to look around and see that the prosperity of this country depends on the young people, and that we should plan for them? For instance, what is education here, and what is it for? For whom is it? For instance, long ago the young had specific roles to play in society, but today they find it rather difficult to know the right thing to do. This is simply because nobody seems to know what their role is. For instance, they would meet to dance because they were required to do so by society. Dancing had a purpose. They met in group cultivation shirts because they were required to contribute to the riches of the community. They met at, say, a religious ceremony, because someone's life was in danger. They met to contribute to society there and then. The whole thing was pragmatic. But what happens in school today is that they go to school and only hope that they will contribute something to society in later years. They meet in dances, not because the society requires that of them. They meet in religious ceremonies, not because someone's life is in danger, but because it happens to be on the school programme. They go on meeting, but what for?” He walked around the room, non-stop. Steve and I looked on.

“It's just a pity. It's really a pity. These young people are being thrown rather too quickly, sometimes, without any guide and guard, into this area of glaring temptations, and nobody cares about what happens to them. To us everything is progressing so long as the school fees are paid in time, and taxes are collected. So long as the Western world says that we are progressing or developing. So long as many embassies are opened in different countries of the world. But nobody cares. Not even our gods; they disappeared! The society, our society, our people today seem to lack that sort of myth and the beyond-reality which controlled the lives of our grandfathers. We live in a fluid society whose identity has succumbed to the forces from outside. And we go on clutching at the white man hoping for support. And that way, we hope to survive. We live in a vacuum!”

He stopped walking about and resumed his seat. He put more tobacco in his pipe, lit it, and gazed at both of us.

“Can Flora start working now?” Steve asked as if he had been itching to ask the question all the while.

“Oh yes. Definitely.” He beamed at me and something tickled inside me.

“That's fine then. Thanks,” Steve said, still serious.

“Yes. She will be working in the general office. I think she can help us with the newspaper clippings. Won't you like it Flora?”

“Oh, thank you, sir,” I stammered. I could not believe my ears that I had been given a job.

“As for the salary, you will definitely get your scale. School Certificate scale, whether you pass or not.” He smiled.

“Thank you sir,” I said again. Was I dreaming or not?

“We are not responsible for your accommodation. That's your headache, young girl,” he said as he looked out of the window.

“It's all right, sir. I stay with my sister.”

“That's solved then,” Steve said with relief.

“Come along,” Mr Ruhu said. “I want to introduce you to the people you will be working with.” We went to the general office together. He introduced me to three young girls of my age, and one boy.

“This is Flora. She will be working with you as from tomorrow.”

They greeted me. I smiled at them. I could not believe the whole thing. Was I really going to work?

“Now, you can go home and prepare for tomorrow's duty,” Mr Ruhu said.

“Don't disappoint us. You must always be on time and while you are here, you will always obey orders given to you by myself and my secretary, who is not in at the moment. I expect you will like the place.”

“Thank you sir,” I said, almost crying.

He walked away quickly, almost running, and my new associates laughed as he disappeared out of the room.

“He is a good man,” one commented.

“I like him,” said another.

“Don't mind about him when he shouts at you,” one of them advised me.

“He is an academician,” the boy laughed.

“He is good,” I confirmed. I said 'goodbye-for-a while' to them and walked out of the office. Steve was waiting for me in the car. He said he was going to drop me at the taxi-park as he was going that way, and I thanked him for the kindness and the trouble he had taken to get me a job. He said that we might meet again since now he knew where to find me.

That day I went home very early. The sun was still smiling at the city, and clouds appeared scared of its vicinity. The western horizon looked bright and relaxed as it prepared to receive the sun for a night.

I was in a happy mood when I reached home, and my sister was surprised by such a sudden change. But when I told her that a certain man had helped me to get a job, she understood the cause. I had never felt happier in my life.

**Chapter Five**

I found it a great pleasure to work, and the group I was working with made it very interesting for me. They were very sociable and we got on well so easily. We liked each other's company, and within three weeks I regarded the girls as close friends.

The boy was good as well, although he usually made suggestive passes at me. But I did not want to become a nuisance in the office which would probably result in my losing the job. He could not resist turning his face to me whenever I passed by. Even the girls in the office were beginning to comment on my figure. They said it was good and that I should regard myself as lucky for having such a beautiful appearance. I treated such comments as jokes and I appropriately laughed them off. I tried to be modest with everybody in the office so as not to stir the fire of jealousy, for I had learnt from my short experience that a woman does not welcome easily the company of a more beautiful female. A woman always schemes to get company wherein she can dominate. I knew that very well. However, my beautiful figure would appear conspicuous without myself intending to dominate anybody.

We worked in a team. The job comprised cutting articles out of heaps and heaps of newspapers. The articles had been marked by Mr Ruhu himself, and then they would be given to us by his secretary. After cutting out the required articles we then put them in files according to the subject of the articles. They ranged from birth control to aerodynamics. There were many articles. It was the kind of job that did not require us to think much, and that actually encouraged us to talk as we worked. Otherwise, the whole exercise would have been rather boring. We talked, joked and laughed together as we worked. There was no one and no need to assert authority over the other. We were equals. We worked hard and cleared big heaps of newspapers every day without complaint.

One day, Mr Ruhu came to our office.

“Morning youngsters,” he shouted.

“Morning sir,” we replied in chorus.

He looked around quietly, and we kept on working on the cuttings.

“How are you doing Flora?” he asked.

“Very well, sir.”

The others looked at me. He looked over my head to see what I was doing and I fumbled with newspapers. I almost cut myself.

The others laughed.

“Do you read what you cut?” he asked.

“No, sir,” I answered.

“If we do, we won't have enough time to cut out many articles,” one of the girls said.

“We would do the reading only,” another one giggled.

“We can't read now,” the boy said seriously.

“You cannot read?” Mr Ruhu asked.

We looked at the boy. “I mean, nobody wishes to read again,” he explained, “after reading so much for the exams.”

“What do you mean?” one of the girls retorted.

“I mean simply that,” the boy said, laughing.

“You are working very hard,” Mr Ruhu commented. “Come for more newspapers from my office.”

“Yes, sir.” The boy followed Mr Ruhu. We said nothing.

“Mr Ruhu is a good man,” I said.

“Yes, he is very good. Approachable and kind,” one of the girls observed.

“I like him. He does not show off like some educated men,” said another.

“He does not behave like some men who take the advantage of seducing the girls working for them,” another girl said, laughing.

We laughed with her. She was a very funny girl with funny stories about men. It was mainly the way she told the stories that made us laugh. She had pretty eyes which she could use effectively to relate a story. One day she told us a story of how her cousin was hijacked by a man when she was going to see her uncle who stayed in one of the senior residential areas. She had waited for a bus, but no bus came. Then she decided to walk, hoping that a bus would find her on the way. Suddenly, a car stopped near her and a gentleman who was driving offered to give her a lift, at least to the next bus-stop. It was beginning to drizzle and so she accepted. Instead of taking her to the bus stop, the man drove straight to his flat. Well, the story was not unfamiliar as it was one of the many incidents in the city. But the way she told the story was so funny that instead of sympathising with her cousin we only laughed. She told us so many stories of that type, and when I heard them I realised that I was not the only victim of the animal called 'man'. Many young girls, even women much older, were becoming victims of those big-bellied men with pockets bulging with money.

“How do you like those men?” I asked her.

“Which ones?”

“Those who take advantage when they give you a job,” I said.

“I don't. I want one man. A man whom I love. I want to love a man, and I want him to love me.” She spoke seriously this time. Her laughing eyes dulled with deep thought; no, with a dream. But when I looked at her moments later, a stream of water was running down her checks, and the beautiful eyes were the fountain. Slowly and deliberately, she removed the water from her cheeks and eyes. The eyes were now red with a stare of anger and fear. I got frightened. What a sudden change... from beauty to frightening ugliness!

“Judith! Judith!” one of the girls called her with concern. I could see she, too, could not understand what might have changed that lively, laughing girl into a heap of scared, sobbing femininity.

“Leave me, leave me alone,” she shouted back and ran away into the toilet. We looked at one another agape, not knowing what to say or do next. And so it was. We never knew what went on inside her despite the beautiful mask she always wore. Such a beautiful smile!

However, when I met her some years later she was still beautiful but her cheeks had rather sunken. Her eyes were still laughing but her lips were more often tightened up. I was cheeky enough to remind her of the incident in the general office at the university.

She looked at me gently and extended her hand to my shoulder, and then said: “I feel ashamed when I remember it.”

“I am sorry,” I said.

“I don't know why I broke down, but I think it is because I had carried that burden for a long time.” She stopped and looked at me as if expecting a question.

“I am sorry,” I said, not knowing why I was sorry.

“When you asked me whether I wanted those men who use us women, I got angry with myself because of what I had been doing. Many men had misused me so much that I hated them. I hated them. And I wanted one man to love. Only one, and I would live life again. But where could I get that one man? It is difficult to get a man who loves a woman.” Her eyes looked past me, unblinking, and reminded me of the eyes of the *mzungu's*wife in the photograph. Those eyes from the shadows looking at something but not actually seeing it. I was going to say that I was sorry, but then she left me abruptly with a forced smile.

Now, coming back to the story. Before Judith came back from the toilet, one of the girls asked me whether I had a boyfriend. The question was so irrelevant that I thought of ignoring it. But if I kept quiet I would be accused of conceit and pride. Those girls would say that I was proud because I thought I was beautiful. So I answered.

“No.”

“No?”

“I don't have one,” I said.

“Aa...a...a...a...aa!” they laughed.

I smiled.

“How about the other gentleman who brought you here?” one asked.

“Yes, the one who introduced you to Mr Ruhu?” another one asked. I smiled. They laughed. They meant Steve. I wondered how they had come to conclude that Steve was my boyfriend. At that time he was not. At least, nothing had developed between us although we had expressed admiration for each other. I had introduced him to Jane as a man who had helped me to get a job and she had encouraged me to be his friend.

She was impressed by his appearance and charming manners. He had been to Jane's place twice and the two of us had dined with him once. But we had not established enough ground to call each other girlfriend or boyfriend. He was a complicated, educated man and I was rather shy to press the point further. However, I was always calculating chances and scheming ways by which I could claim him as mine. For he was a very good man.

“Yes, you love him,” one of them asserted.

“And he loves you, too,” another one said.

“Who could not love you?” one laughed.

“I do, too,” the boy said firmly.

We did not expect him to be near us and so we were surprised to learn, rather too late, that he had been listening to our conversation.

“How can you come in like that?” one of the girls burst out with anger.

“I am sorry, ladies,” he said. I looked at him and kept quiet.

“To be sorry is not enough!” one said.

“Then I will do something else,” he said as he came over to me. “I will kiss her!” But instead of doing it, he ran away laughing and the girls chased him briefly, throwing a few newspapers at him.

That was the kind of atmosphere in our office. We were jolly people and hard-working. We could talk about anything provided nobody was hurt. And everybody avoided hurting everybody else, even when there was something to laugh at. Even if it was not funny, one had to join in so as not be considered proud. The boy always joined in the jokes, but whenever it came to arguments he was sure to lose. We girls combined ourselves against him. A war between the sexes was clearly reflected in such things. On the whole he fitted into the group and, at times, he was so overbearing that we simply dismissed him as proud and shouted him down. Sometimes we would withdraw and talk about ourselves, giving him no chance to participate in the conversation. And if he demanded to know what we were whispering about we only shrank into a shell of feminine reticence. That way, we usually won the battle.

Within weeks we had come to know one another so well that, as if by miracle, I forgot my connection with Tom. I think it is because I was always occupied. After all, I had secured a job, and my heart had been captured by a young man who had sparked a fire of love inside me that was more valuable than all the things I had received from Tom. All the men I had met before disappeared from my mind. The *mzungu* man faded away rather too quickly, although I kept remembering his strong hairy arms. Mr Lupoi ceased to exist as far as I was concerned. The thugs, poor me! I could not forget that experience in the car nor shall I ever. It will follow me to my grave. I pray to God that nobody, especially innocent school girls, should ever suffer a similar torture. At times I am thrown into emotions of hate towards the whole race of men. But God forbid, for there are some good men like Steve. And I think some women have their own good men who should not be included in my curse.

One day, I was walking home after duty when a car from nowhere suddenly stopped near me. I had no interest in looking at it and continued on my way. But I could not go very far, for my name was called out. I looked round.

“Flora!” It was Tom. “Flora!”

“Tom!” I said in surprise.

He got out of the car. We embraced each other and he looked at me, smiling. He was still Tom, businesslike.

“Tom, you have put on weight!”

“I was gonna say that to yee,” he said. “Yee have put on so much weight that we couldn't recognise yee.”

“Where have you been?” I asked rather mechanically. I felt embarrassed when he commented on my putting on weight. I wanted to change the topic. I knew I had put on weight and many people had made similar comments before. There was nothing I could do about it. I could not cut the weight down as that was not the kind of weight to cut down easily, the fact was that I was pregnant. Signs of pregnancy were clear: my periods had stopped; I had frequent morning nausea; and I felt weak and dizzy quite often.

“We were away. On a business trip. Come and greet Kit.”

We walked to the car.

“Flora!” He greeted me excitedly and we looked at each other in silence. And then, carelessly, he said: “What's the matter? You look pregnant.”

I was embarrassed and looked at my waist. Then I shifted my eyes to Tom.

“Do I look so really?” I said in a cheeky way which helped me to master the situation.

“She is only getting fat. City girls don't get pregnant,” Tom said as he opened the door for me. I entered the car and asked them where they were going. They told me that they had been looking for me and that Tom had felt lonely without me. I laughed it off because I had learnt about the cheap flattery of men.

“How is your job?”

“Fine. How did you know that I was working?”

“We knew it the very day you got the job,” Kit said.

“But you said you were out of the country.”

“That day we were here. And even if we were not here physically, we were present somehow.”

I got frightened.

They kept quiet.

“I hope you have not planted spies on me.”

“No,” said Tom. “In any case, spies are not necessary. I mean, we just know.”

I said nothing.

“We wanna take yee out, Flora,” Tom said.

“Tonight,” Kit added without a smile.

“Yes. We're gonna see our old places again. What do yee think Flora?”

“I don't know really.” I said. “My sister is not in and I should look after the house.” I lied.

“Where is she?” Kit asked.

“She went to the village.”

“Well, I hope your sister's boyfriend won't take advantage again,” Tom said acidly.

I kept quiet. I felt uneasy; that uneasiness that precedes vomiting. I did not know the immediate cause of the stomach upset. I feared that I would empty my stomach any time, and kept on swallowing saliva now and then hoping to keep the contents in the stomach. Was it because I was pregnant or was it something else? Was it the company of Tom and Kit which had upset my stomach? It could have been, for I definitely did not feel at home with them the way I did some months back. There was something strange and silly in their voices. They had changed. Tom no longer attracted me. That magnetic personality he used to possess seemed to have slipped away. The winner's look he used to wear on his face was no longer there. His face was strangely plain as if it was a wooden mask. Nothing about them attracted me, nothing at all. They were just two heaps of meaty men talking nonsense.

Maybe it was I who had changed. There was a nagging strangeness in me which I had never before experienced.

I did not see Tom the way I used to in earlier days. In those days, Tom was my support, my guardian, my man, my everything. But on that day, he looked different. As we drove on, I began to realise that I no longer needed him. He was not useful to me any more. I had got myself a man whom I loved not because that man would give me money or a job, but because he loved me. That was the difference. That man, that boyfriend, that new man was Steve. He was my love.

“Can we go out Flora?” Tom insisted. I said nothing.

“She has accepted, you rogue. You'll have to learn that women communicate most effectively by silence,” Kit said.

I sighed. I did not know what to say. I did not know how I could go out with those men when my new friendship with Steve needed attention and care. There would be rumours that I was seen with men and that would spoil everything. But I lacked the courage to tell them 'no'. I did not know how to begin. They had been my friends, and probably they still were. They had helped me in many ways and I should have been more grateful to them. Even the clothes I had on were bought with Tom's money. Even the shoes and the handbag; almost everything on me came from his money: even the make-up on my face! How could I be so much of a beast? Even the child I was carrying could be his. I got confused.

“When is your sister coming?” Kit asked.

“I don't know,” I lied.

We had reached my sister's house.

“Well, whatever the case, we shall come for you at ten pm,” Kit said. “So prepare yourself.” I said nothing.

“OK?” Tom asked winking at me.

In the past his wink was irresistible. But it did not touch me deeply that day. I could not tell what was wrong with me or with them. But the truth was that Tom's place had been taken by someone else. It was Steve's star that was shining. Tom's star had disappeared in the dark sky of lust. However, the shadow of pregnancy dulled my happiness, especially when I did not even know the man responsible.

“OK,” I found myself saying unconsciously.

And before I could correct myself they had driven off.

“Shame!” I cursed myself. I had nothing to do except to wait for them at ten o'clock.

I found my sister preparing to go out. “Welcome back Flo.” She smiled.

“Thanks, Jane.”

“You look tired. Why don't you help yourself to a cold drink or a shower? Either of them will do you good,” she said as she looked at herself in a mirror.

“I'll try both.”

She said nothing. I helped myself to a drink and changed my clothes.

“Jane?” I called out.

“Yes.”

“Are you going out?”

“Why? Because I have washed? You girl, I always take a bath,” she said laughing.

“No, not that. You look extremely smart.”

“Thanks Flo.”

“I'm sure Mike will be happy to see you so smart.”

“Well, Mike likes me always whether smart or not smart.”

“Even naked?”

“That's when he likes me most!”

We laughed together. That kind of laughter which springs from the bottom of the heart and streams through the throat and mouth like the music of a home-made drum. I laughed hard, but stopped suddenly as if my throat had been grabbed by a murderer. I remembered the day Mike took me to bed. I began to blame myself for having been unfair to my sister.

“Jane,” I called out.

“Yes,” she answered, still laughing.

“I am going out, too.” She kept quiet. “I'll be going at ten. Will you be back before that?”

“I am not sure. Who is taking you out? I hope you have not switched to another one. Steve will be very angry if you do.”

“No.”

“No? What do you mean no?”

“I mean that I am going out,” I said.

“With who?”

“My friends.”

“Friends?”

“Yes. My friends.” She kept quiet and again I said nothing.

“What happened to Steve?” she asked, worried.

“Nothing. He is very nice!”

“Come on. Come on Flo. I expect you to be mature by now.”

“Am I not?”

She shook her head.

“I am mature!” I giggled.

“Look Flo, don't ever annoy me. How can you lose your chance like that?” she stammered with anger. “I mean, supposing Steve finds you with these men? Did these men bewitch you? I pity you really. If I were you I would concentrate on Steve. He is a nice man and...”

“I know, and I told you so.”

“Then what do you think you are doing? Can't you stick to one?”

“I can.”

“Then do!” she shouted with rage. I looked away. “Steve is a nice man. He is handsome, educated and has a regular job. Why don't you see things?”

“Jane, you don't understand.” She looked at me inquisitively. “How can I just forget Tom so quickly? A man who did all sorts of things with me? A man who did this and that for me. A man who bought me all this. A man who might be the father of my child,” I sobbed. “Do you want me to forget them? Tell me! Tell me!” I hurled myself to the floor.

“I don't know how you can forget them, but just forget them. They are men who are only after your body. They gave you the money because of your sex. They were trapping you into liking them. They bought you with money, things and all that. But just forget them. They got what they wanted. Poor sister! You got what you wanted, too. But just forget them. They are only men. Moreover, you don't know them. For instance, has Tom ever taken you to his home or even introduced you to one of his respectable friends? Has he, Flo? Tell me. Who is he? Where does he stay? What does he do? What do you know about them?”

“They are businessmen.”

“What business? Flo, what business?” I kept quiet and she said nothing.

“Why are you angry with me?” I said.

“Because you don't understand,” she said slowly, shaking her head.

“I do.”

“All right. You do. But one thing more, my dear sister. Don't think you can grow too big for any advice. What will the parents think of me? That I neglected you and left you alone to be devoured by these city vultures? Flora, why have you brought this pain on me?” she sobbed.

I looked at her angrily and said, “What do you want me to do? Tom could be the father of this child. Someone must own this child. Someone must love this child.”

“These men do not have love. They are only after sex. They are using you; leave them! They are not good for you. Please, Steve is a good man and I am sure he will give you what a woman wants... love.”

“But I am pregnant. And it isn't Steve's child!” I said.

“Then let it grow. We shall find a way to solve the problem.” I said nothing.

“Look my dear. I don't intend to annoy you in any away but I must tell you that you need my advice. From now on avoid these men. They are good for nothing.”

I kept quiet. She looked at me like a mother. “But I have already agreed to go out with them. Jane.”

“They are not good for you.” she said with emotion as she moved out. “Don't forget to lock the house. I hope to be back by ten, anyway.”

“Please take your key with you.” I said after her.

As soon as she went away. I switched off the lights and went to bed. I entered my bed half-naked. It was rather cold, but warmth began to come when the bed sheets accepted me. All of a sudden, a spasm of emotion shook me, and I found myself crying. I did not know why I cried. Tears kept on coming and I kept on wiping them off with the head of a sheet. I wished I knew why I was crying. It is annoying sometimes to the person crying not to know why so many tears are being shed. At around ten, I heard a knock on the door. I did not answer. I suspected it was Tom and I had decided not to go out with him. One heart tempted me to go and say 'hello' to him... my man, my everything... and another one advised me not to. I obeyed the second heart and stayed in bed. The knocking went on for some time, but later I heard a car starting. I breathed heavily as if I had been relieved of the big load of a basketful of sorghum. Immediately, sleep lulled me and led me into another world of peace. I was woken up by lights at around midnight. I opened my eyes in installments until I could accommodate the light. Above me stood my sister, smiling.

“I did not go, Jane,” I said.

“Thanks Flo. You are a good girl,” she said and went to her bedroom. I went back to sleep.

**Chapter Six**

On Saturday, Steve came to see me in our office. My heart leapt into my mouth, and I felt like going to the toilet to relieve myself. The muscles of my eyes twitched, and my breasts heaved up and down. Was it the sight of Steve that had excited me or was it what he had come to see me for? I could not locate the cause of the excitement. Had he found out about my affair with Mr Lupoi or Tom? Or perhaps he had heard about my affair with my former teacher. A few days back my former teacher had met me in the city and persuaded me to go to his house. I found it difficult to refuse him when he led me to his bedroom.

I got confused and I think I appeared so to those who were around. I thought about all this for a second or two. How wonderful the mind works so quickly! It does so, especially, when one feels guilty about something.

“How are you, ladies?” he greeted us generally.

“And gentleman!” the boy reminded him, laughing.

“Oh yes,” Steve laughed. “It is rather difficult these days to differentiate between a man and woman by way of dress.”

We laughed.

“They are fine,” the boy said seriously.

“We are not fine,” one of the girls said.

“You are fine, of course. Most girls are fine during weekends,” the boy insisted.

“Shame!” one of the girls shouted.

“It seems you enjoy one another's company here,” Steve commented.

The girls looked at me.

I looked at him and smiled.

“Yes we do, thanks,” the boy said.

“Working very hard?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” we replied in chorus.

“Very good. Very good indeed.” The girls looked at me and smiled. “Flora, can I see you for a while?” he said.

“Yes please,” I replied as I stood up.

The girls smiled at me more meaningfully as we went out of the office. We went to Mr Ruhu's office, and I began to wonder why he had to take me there. If he wanted to talk to me about my bad ways anywhere would have been suitable. Maybe he was going to talk to me while Mr Ruhu was listening. Could it be as bad as that? No, Steve cannot cause my expulsion. He is a nice man. He got me the job and how can he after a few months work against me? And I 'saw' Lupoi's mischievous eyes just a moment before he devoured me like a lion. I 'saw' my former teacher leading me to his bedroom which he shared with his legally married wife. I wished I could evaporate and vanish.

“Sit down, my dear.” I sat down. Mr Ruhu was not present. “You look scared. What's the matter?”

“I am excited.”

“Excited about what? Did you expect me?”

“No, and that's why.”

“I see. I see. Now Flora, I am going away.”

“Away? Where?” Was that another way of saying “I have finished with you?”

“She-ee. Don't make a noise. I am going back to Zaire.”

I looked at him with surprise. Oh, well perhaps that meant our relationship had ceased. We had not enjoyed much time together. He had not held me in his arms and his strong mouth had not been anywhere near mine even for a second. What could I do? I had jilted Tom for him and now he was going away, leaving me alone to be laughed at.

“But not this month. Next month. I only came to ask you to come with me for a weekend up-country.”

“Wonderful! Steve, you are serious?”

“Shee-ee. Don't raise your voice. You will disturb the others.”

“Steve, you are serious?” I whispered.

“Of course I am.”

“Oh how nice! Let me go and tell my friends.” I was excited.

“Just a minute. Just a minute. Have you ever been to any of the interesting areas in the country?”

“No, not at all. The farthest I have been to is only fifty miles from here. And I went there during a school excursion.”

“OK. We shall try one of the National Parks.”

“Oh! Oh! Let's go now!” I said as I ran out of Mr Ruhu's office and reached our office in no time. The girls were surprised to see me behave in the way I did and they gazed at me. I explained briefly.

“I am going out. Now.”

They stared at me.

“I told you that weekends...” the boy said laughing.

“Flora, where?” one of the girls asked.

“The National Park.”

“How lucky!” one girl commented.

“You will like the place,” another one said.

“When are you coming back?” the boy asked scornfully.

“Shut up, you!” one girl shouted him down. The rest of us laughed.

“OK Flora. See you on Monday,” one said.

“OK Flora, enjoy yourself!” they shouted.

Steve was waiting for me in the car. He smiled at me when I joined him, I said nothing. I was too happy to say anything.

“I think you will need some personal effects, don't you think so, Flora?”

“Yes. Let's go to my sister's place first. And I think I should inform her about the journey.”

“Of course it is good to do so,” he said.

“I just can't go away without informing her,” I lied. I used to go out with men without informing her. But it is always safe to give your boyfriend the impression that you are not a rogue. Men will believe you unless they are not in love with you.

We went to my sister's house and found that she was not in. She had gone to work. I got myself the things I wanted for the weekend - a few knickers, handkerchiefs, two pairs of trousers, a sweater, some make-up and other small things. And then we headed for the National Park.

The day was clear. The sky was deep-blue as if it had been washed clean for me to see. The sun shone with a rare brilliance. Birds flew up and down gliding into the air with provoking leisure. The vegetation was a mass of green with not a single tree shaking, and one wished to jump on top of trees and lie there. It was like a very wide green mattress. I was in the highest spirits that morning and did most of the talking, while Steve did most of the listening. I commented on everything I saw: people standing along the road, cows grazing nearby, vehicles passing us by and the ones we overtook, big trees and small trees that rushed past us, the size of the road and its appearance, houses near us and far off, crops in gardens. Many things. My mouth was full with words. Steve commented here and there saying a yes or a no wherever it suited him. After so many miles of driving he began to talk to me.

“Can you tell me a bit about yourself, Flora?”

“I love you!” I laughed.

“Thank you,” he laughed, too.

“I have never told you that,” I said.

“No, but I have always known.” I said nothing and looked at his profile. “Tell me more. Something about your background.”

“My background?”

“Yes please.”

“I don't think you'll like it.”

“I just want to know where you come from and so on.”

“My parents, relatives and other things?”

“Yes please. When you were born, how you grew up and with whom.”

“I see,” I said hesitantly. What did he want the information for? Wouldn't he reject me after knowing so much about me? I wondered. But after debating with myself, I decided that there would be no harm in telling him everything about myself.

“But do you love me?” I asked, ogling him.

“That should be pretty obvious, Flora.”

“OK, I'll tell you.”

“Thank you.”

“I was born about nineteen years ago.”

“Where?”

“Aa...aa...aa. Wait. I'll tell you the story. Don't interrupt me.” I giggled.

“OK.”

“I was born eighteen years ago I think.”

“You are not sure?” He laughed and I liked the depth in the voice.

“I am sure I am eighteen years old.”

“Go ahead.”

“And I was born in... but why do you want to know my tribe?”

“Well, I just want to know your background. It might be necessary.”

“Are you a tribalist?”

“No, I believe we have tribes. To have a tribe or to know someone's tribe does not make one a tribalist, Flora.”

“I don't know. And I won't tell you.”

“Well, you can skip that. By the time you finish your story you will have betrayed yourself.”

“Then I won't tell you.”

“It is up to you.”

“Well I was born in Kalo District but I don't remember being there. The truth is my parents left that part of the country when I was a few hours old. And up to now, I don't know exactly where I was born.”

“I see,” he nodded.

I felt my eyes warming with tears. The mention of one being born reminded me of my pregnancy.

“Is your mother still alive?”

“Yes.”

“And your father?”

“No, he died.”

“I am sorry. I am sorry, Flora. Perhaps we can stop the whole thing, for I don't wish to remind you of such things.”

“It's all right. He died so long ago that we have accepted the fact.”

“I am sorry, Flora.”

“He used to work in the city and spent most of the time away from us. We knew only mother right from the beginning. He used to come to see us occasionally. Say, during weekends. Sometimes he would be away for a month or even two. We did not worry at all. Whenever he came he was like a visitor.”

“Did you have playmates? I mean do you remember your childhood playmates?”

“Yes. I usually meet some of them in the city. Some are at school, some are not. Some work in bars and others are already married.”

“How about Jane?”

“Jane is much older than I am. In fact she baby-sat me. And again she was lucky in that she went to a boarding school when she was young. She knows nothing about the hard life of being a day-girl.”

“Which school did she go to?”

“Simago High School.”

“Oh, that's a good school.”

“She is a lucky woman,” I said.

“Well, which school did you go to? Was it near Simago High School?”

“No, I went to a church school first, where I stayed for a year. We used to spend most of the time digging and clearing the school compound. And sometimes we worked in teachers' gardens. During lessons we used to sing many songs. That was all. I didn't like it.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to go to a big school. A boarding school. I wanted to wear a good uniform like my sister's. I wanted to be like her.”

“Jane?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Now what happened after your church school?”

“My father moved me to another school nearby. A few miles from our home. About four miles off. Big and with good buildings.”

“You liked it?”

“Yes I did. Except I didn't like to walk that distance every day. About eight miles a day without lunch was bad.”

“It must have been a very difficult time for you.”

“It was, but what could I do? I had to walk. My mother insisted that I should persevere. She wanted me to continue with my education, for she said, 'without education you will never get the good things a respectable woman would wish to have.'”

“Such as?”

“Hm...m...such as good dresses!” I laughed. He laughed too. “Well, money really. A good job, good food to eat, and a good husband.”

“Good husband? You didn't think of husbands at that stage, did you Flora?” Something squeezed my heart at the thought that I may not get a good husband, after all.

“Well, I didn't. But my mother did. She used to tell me that I should go to school so that I would be able to get a rich, educated husband with a good house and a car. She used to tell me that if I did not get an education I would live in poverty as she did. That my poor husband would be away all the time doing lowly jobs as her husband was doing. She always told me those things. She wanted me to be turned into a much better woman than she was. And her words motivated me. I worked very hard.”

“You must have a very good mother. I wish I could see her.”

“Do you mean it really? I'll take you there. She would be happy to see my friend.”

“Well, we shall arrange it. What did you want to be?”

“At first I wanted to be like my sister. Speak good English. Write good letters and all that. Then, as I grew older my mother's influence on me became greater every day. I wanted to be a very educated woman. As learned as my teacher. I wanted to be like her. To teach. At least to be independent.”

“Do you like teaching?”

“No. I don't think I like it now. Always talking to small children and nothing else! There is no money in it. I want a job which offers a lot of money. I want to help my mother and relatives. And of course, I want to sit in an office - with a telephone near me, you know!”

“I see. But don't you think there is money in teaching? I mean it depends on your qualifications and where you teach. For instance, Mr Ruhu is a teacher and he earns a lot of money.”

“I thought he was a lecturer.”

“Yes, it means the same thing. A lecturer is a teacher, really.”

“Oh, well. But it means having so many qualifications. Going to universities and reading all the time. It is terrible!”

“Wouldn't you like to go to university?”

“I wish I could. It has always been my aim to go as far as possible. But can I? I am at the mercy of examiners.”

“But you would like to go to university?”

“Yes, I mean what can I do now? I was taught nothing at school to enable me to be independent. There are so many of us, so many that unless we continue up to university, we just can't get good jobs. Nobody to employ us if we drop out of the system. Before the exams I wanted to have a job, madly, but now I should like to continue with my studies.”

“Why don't you stop at this level and do something else as your career?”

“What?” I asked with surprise.

“I mean for four years you have been prepared for any good career now,” he said seriously. Was he joking or what?

“Why didn't you stop at that level yourself?”

“I passed my exams and continued to advanced level,” he said in a most carefree manner.

“Me too, I would like to go as far as there.”

“And if you pass the School Certificate will you just go on up to university?”

“But you did the same. Why don't you want others to do that? You are selfish!” I said thickly.

“No, I am not selfish really. What I mean is this, what do you want to go to university for?”

“Why? Did you not go there?” I asked.

“Well, it seems we don't understand each other. Perhaps let me put it this way. It could be better if you joined a course of your choice at this level so that you concentrate on it throughout your life. I mean, isn't it better than just continuing to university without having any knowledge of what you would like to be in life. Just to come out of the university with a paper qualification?”

“I want to have that paper qualification too! Why didn't you do what you are telling me? In any case, what do you think I can achieve now better than acquiring a university degree and people knowing it!”

“Surely you are not working so hard in order only to please people.”

“Well, Steve, tell me sincerely. What do you think will be the use of History or Mathematics or Geography or any other subjects if I stop at this stage?”

“You take up a career and utilise them - of course depending on what career you choose.”

“And what is the use of doing these examinations in nine subjects if none of them will be of any use to me? I mean, when we were preparing for the last examinations, our aim was to be promoted to higher classes. At least, teachers told us so. And those who join courses are supposed to have failed. Everybody knows that except you.”

“Oh well, I can see your argument, but I don't think that it should be like that always.”

“But teachers prepared us with that aim. What else could we do?”

“I see. I'm sure you aren't blaming teachers who spent all their precious time helping to educate you.”

“I don't know. All I want is to pass and continue to the university.”

“Well, I reckon something must be done in this respect. I mean, the Ministry of Education should realise that apart from going to university there are other things to do which are equally rewarding or even better.”

“You tell them. Don't tell me. I simply want to go to university.”

Steve pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his brow. He was sweating. I don't know whether it was because of the weather or the argument. He seemed to have been surprised by my stand in the argument, but did not betray any sign of anger or impatience with me. He smiled the argument off and changed the subject.

“By the way, those girls you work with, who is the other girl with lovely eyes?”

I felt fire in my heart. Surely Steve had not fallen in love with Judith? If he had, then that would be the end of my happiness. For Judith had all the tactics of seducing men any woman would wish to apply. It would be even worse for me the moment he found out I was pregnant.

“She is called Anne,” I lied. My throat choked with some kind of vapour and I coughed like some Asians I had seen in dukhas. I felt dizzy and uncomfortable and pulled myself as far away from him as possible.

“She is pretty,” he said with finality.

I almost cried. How could he begin praising another woman in my presence? Didn't he have a heart? Was that meant to hurt me or to punish me for having argued with him? Did he already know that I was pregnant? What sort of man was he? Wasn't his heart as good as his face? I couldn't understand. He was an aggressive man who would capitalise on one's weakness in order to control the situation. In fact his trick worked, for I withdrew from the argument and kept quiet until we reached our destination. Though quiet I was busy blaming myself for my irresponsible relationships with men.

We arrived at Alibo Hotel in the afternoon. The sky was not as clear as it was at the time we started our journey. There were patches of cloud above us assuming different shapes. Some were moving as if in a competition to see which one would pass under the sun first. Others kept immobile like cows chewing the cud after a day's meal. All the same the warmth of the sun continued to bless us.

I was impressed by the site and location of the hotel. It was a cool place with extremely luxurious facilities one wouldn't expect to find in such a remote part of the country.

I imagine it was so comfortable for the sake of tourists who, no doubt, deserve such comfort. And indeed, there were many of them around, mostly Europeans - so many that the place looked as if it was in Europe.

We were given a room. Very neat and beautiful with all the necessary facilities inside. I had seen many hotel rooms in my short life and this one could be rated among the best. We bathed, changed clothes and then joined other people in the Verandah Lounge to relax. We were surprised to see that waiters could not attend to us in the way they were attending to Europeans. We sat there for about thirty minutes without anybody serving us. And when I called one of the waiters who kept on passing by our seats as he served others, Steve advised me to cool down. He told me, with despair in his eyes, that I was not going to change the system by my shrill calls. He went on to tell me that most waiters and waitresses in most hotels in the country were like that. They would prefer to serve the whites rather than their fellow Africans. That situation did not ease my irritable condition.

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, ask me!”

“Maybe it is because the whites give them big tips.”

“That is most probable. But mostly I think it is because of the nigger complex.”

“Nigger complex?” I didn't know what it meant.

“Yes. Some blacks think that the white man is better in all respects. So they take pleasure in serving him because he is better. God forbid!” He slammed the arm of his chair with his palm. I understood his anger and kept quiet. “It is strange why God created us so. Even some harlots in our towns boast loudly after sleeping with a white man. You will excuse my vulgar talk, but I can assure you that some African men would think it very important to marry a white woman or even just sleep with her.”

A cold stream of fear ran along my back to my buttocks when he mentioned sleeping with whites. Was he indirectly accusing me of having slept with a *mzungu*? Surely he didn't know. Or maybe he knew. I felt my body get sticky. I was sweating! His eyes kept being pinned on me as if searching for a confession or a denial.

“You must have heard of the house girls and ayahs in our towns,” he continued. I nodded uncomfortably. Why was he prolonging the argument? “When they are looking for cooking jobs, they usually quote that they were once cooking for a *mzungu* - as a high qualification in catering!” He yawned.

Presently a waiter came to us and asked what we would have, Steve made the order coolly and politely, to my admiration.

“I thought you were going to bark at him. I wanted to do it on your behalf.”

“No, there is no use barking at the poor fellow. It is not his fault. He is working within a system. If I'm to bark, I should bark at the system.” I nodded. I did not know what he meant, though. “You may remember what Mr Ruhu was talking about the other day he gave you a job?”

“Yes. He is a nice man. He gave me the job just like that!” I giggled in appreciation.

“Yes, he did. But he did say something more important than giving you a job. Something about our education system.”

“Oh well, I know. He said I should always be on time, and that I shouldn't let him down.”

He laughed loudly and everybody looked at us. He laughed and laughed. He almost fell off the chair because of the jolting forces of laughter. It took him some time to settle down again. He got out a handkerchief and dried his eyes which were wet because of laughing. I had never seen Steve laugh like that. I wish I knew the cause of the fun; I would have enjoyed it as much as he did.

“Look, my dear,” he said, leaning towards me. “It seems you have not been following what I have been talking about. And to see you nodding and telling me what Mr Ruhu told you threw me into this gust of laughter.”

It was my turn to laugh. But something I did not expect happened. As I recovered from the great fit of laughter, almost all the Europeans had left the lounge and others were preparing to leave. I noticed that we were the only people in the lounge. Before we could find out the cause of the sudden exodus, a man in a dark suit with a bow tie, walked up to us. Without greeting us he began to rebuke us.

“Do you see what you have done? Why don't you behave when visitors are around?”

“What is it now?” Steve asked, as puzzled as I was.

“You don't know what you have done? How can you laugh like that when these people are here?”

“You mean these people have gone away because we laughed?” Steven asked again.

“Because you laughed, indeed! Is that how they laugh? Europeans don't laugh like that and you should not disturb them!”

“Who are you by the way?” Steve got to his feet and I saw that he was angry. I only hoped that he would not fight the man in the suit and the bow tie.

“I am the manager here. Do you understand? And if you don't behave well the management may withdraw its services from you.” He said this loud enough for the benefit of some Europeans who were about to disappear around a corner.

“Mr Manager, I do appreciate the burdens of your duty. But as we are brothers, let us sit down and talk it over.”

“No, I have other things to do,” he said curtly. “Take this as a stem warning.”

“Well, I guess you would like to know who I am before you throw me out of the room,” Steve said as he showed him a card. The manager read it and I could see his face tightening.

“I am on duty in the service of the Government and my country, with the immunities which you can clearly read from the card. If you continue giving me warnings of that nature you'll be required to explain in writing the circumstances that led to such prompt warnings.” Steve spoke coldly.

“Well - hm - you see I thought you were one of these young men who usually come here to disturb. I... I shall explain the whole thing to the Europeans. I'm sure they will understand.”

Steve shook his head and said. “The Europeans won't understand. If you can't understand what your country is, how much do you expect from them? Mr Manager, this is our country and let us laugh or cry in it. If the Europeans are disturbed by our ways let them go away.”

“Yes, sir,” the manager said hastily and slithered away.

In no time, our drinks arrived and the waiter was already showering us with 'Sir' and 'Madam' rather too often, which looked very odd to me.

“This is the whole thing. I blame our system of education. It must be shattered, for it was based on colonialism and all of us are still colonised. We must change it.”

“But colonialists went away long ago,” I said with pride that my history lessons were still fresh in my head.

“No. Look at that lake. Why call it Lake Bernard? Didn't it have a name before the whites came here?”

“Maybe he is the man who discovered it,” I said.

“Discovered indeed! Surely Bernard was not the first man to set his eyes on that lake. Many people had been living off the lake - eating fish and vegetables from that lake hundreds of years back. The 'explorer' is the most crazy and proud person the African has ever met.”

I ignored him and took my drink. He stood up and walked towards the office of the manager. I had never seen Steve so bitter. I had only seen his charming side. I was beginning to know him; but who can know another person fully? After some minutes, he came back smiling and his face had relaxed. Rubbing his hands together, he told me that we were going to watch animals. He had secured permission from the guard who was willing to take us in his Landrover.

This news excited me and, more than before, I became anxious to see wild animals in their own habitat. A few yards from the hotel we came across antelopes and other small animals which scattered in all directions at our approach.

“I want to see lions,” I said. The guard looked at me and made a face. “You must be a daring woman. What do you want to see those beasts for?” Steve teased me.

“The lions are not beastly,” the guard explained. “In fact, buffaloes are more dangerous than lions.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I don't know,” he said with a smile.

We continued our journey, looking for lions. On our way we saw a herd of hippos and two of them held my attention. They were rubbing their big ugly mouths against each other as if kissing.

“They are kissing each other,” Steve burst out with an explanation as if he had been following my mind. I giggled.

“Animals are like human beings in some respects,” the guard put in.

“Yes, they are. Like human beings, they express their fondness and sexual desire by touching each other. Or by rubbing their bodies against each other,” Steve said.

I giggled and felt shy in the presence of the guard.

“Aa! The lions,” Steve said as he looked through binoculars.

“Have you seen them?” I asked.

“Yes. A good family of them.”

“And those can be very aggressive,” the guard explained, “because of the moral responsibility to protect the young ones. Exactly like human beings. But they are gentle things if you don't make them suspect your motives.”

A shiver gripped my neck when I saw them at a distance of about fifty yards. But after some time the fear disappeared. I began to enjoy the sight. There was the mother, I was told, surrounded by the young ones, about four of them. They were playing together, climbing on one another and at the same time growling. Once in a while, they would go to the mother to seek affection. The mother in turn showed parental care and fondness by rubbing its young ones with mouth, head and even paws. It was a tear-bringing scene. A family at its best, with the love and understanding of a devoted, loving mother. We watched them in intense admiration. I began to wonder whether some of us actually ever got half such affection from our mothers.

The whole thing reminded me of my childhood. How I used to play with my agemates so many years back! How we would go together to fetch water from a river, but would forget about our mission the moment we started playing! I remembered how my mother used to scold me, beat me or make me go without food the whole night. But again, I remembered how she comforted me in her arms at the very time I needed her protection. At the same time, I remembered the scorching words from her whenever she caught me doing unseemly things. For instance, I remembered when she caught me with a small boy of my own age behind a granary, showing each other our private bodies. She gave me a severe beating. But she was a mother, for a few hours later, she comforted me with loving words and tender treatment by giving me food as if nothing had happened. A mother of a person is a very important pillar in the person's life. Indeed, I was surprised to see such care from a mother being reflected in the family of lions. Nature is a wonderful thing to conceive. God is good.

We looked around for some time, and saw elephants and some strange birds. They resembled kites but had a more massive body and much wider wings. Their beaks looked like long curved knives. We came across yet more elephants which gazed at us with little concern. To me, they looked helpless in their bulky skins.

As the sun began to disappear behind the western hills, we drove back to the hotel. Shadows were getting longer and longer and soon they would merge into a united shade. We found that more tourists had arrived, and among them were three Africans. We did not bother to find out who they were. Our room commanded a full view of Lake Bernard, and the silveriness of the water had changed into a light blue sheet of quietness.

The supper was good. I had gone a long time without eating chicken and so I enjoyed the roasted bird with potatoes. After eating we went to the hotel bar and drank beers. The service this time was efficient and the Europeans did not attempt to leave the room whenever we laughed. And we laughed quite often, more so when the time was approaching midnight. It was a night of complete relaxation.

Breakfast was brought to our room. With the hangover, I couldn't take a thing except a glass of orange juice. Steve went to clear the hotel bills, but when he came back his face was drawn. He looked ten years older.

“My goodness! Can you believe it?” said he.

“What?”

“The car. It's stolen,” he said miserably.

I stared at him blankly. Words refused to come.

“This is funny!” He gave me an awkward smile in the attempt to cover up sadness. His words reminded me of Mr Lupoi's when his car was stolen. All of a sudden an idea flashed in mind.

“Steve!”

“What.”

I said nothing. I wanted to tell him the whole story of how Mr Lupoi's car got stolen and all that. Somehow, I was convinced that there must be some connection with the *mzungu* incident, the Lupoi-hotel incident and this one. Otherwise, why was it that every man I happened to go out with had his car stolen? Ever since I had met Kit and Tom, my other men friends had their cars stolen. I wondered whether I should tell him. I wanted to, but I didn't know how to begin.

“Tell me. What do you want to tell me, Flora?”

“Well, I don't know.” I didn't know how to tell him.

“Now look, we have to act quickly. If you have anything to tell me, please do,” he said and ran out of the room.

I cried. I didn't know why my tears were always near. But I began to suspect that Kit and Tom had a big hand in the affair.

Steve made contact with the police and made all sorts of enquiries. When he came back to me he looked haggard and very old.

“Steve, I have suspects.”

“You have? Who are they?”

“Those men who were chasing me at the party. You remember?”

“Did you see them anywhere around?”

“Steve! How about the Africans who came in late yesterday? Are they still around?”

“Yes, of course!” he said with excitement “I must check.”

“I'll come with you,” I said as I ran behind him.

The night watchman confirmed that three Africans had left the hotel at around 3 a.m. One was in a Colt and two were in a Volkswagen. On checking their names with him we found that one of the men in the Volkswagen gave his name as Steve!

Steve stamped the floor with his foot so hard that I thought his leg had split into pieces.

“But can't you see that his signature and mine are different?” Steve asked the guard who looked sleepy.

“But sir, I don't know how to read. How can I know the difference in signatures?”

“Well, at least you could see the difference in writing even if you can't read,” I put in.

“Madam, I can't read. All letters look the same. On top of that, it was at night. The night makes things look the same,” he said, laughing.

Steve almost went mad. “Then what is the use of writing one's name in these useless books?” He directed the question to me and I found myself unable to answer it. He walked to and in front of the guard's post, his hands clutched into each other behind him.

“My friend,” be addressed the guard, “if you see these men again can you recognise them?”

“I don't know, sir. It is difficult. You know it was raining and so I wanted them to go as soon as possible. Our job is difficult. Someone is in the car and you come out in the rain to open the gate for him. It is a difficult job, and the money is little.”

Steve shook his head in despair and walked to the office of the manager. I ran after him.

“Steve, let's hire a car and follow them.”

“Follow them where? We don't know which way they went. They went six hours ago.”

I kept quiet and began to think of tomorrow's duty. What will Mr Ruhu say if I don't report on duty on time? I may lose my job. What shall I do without a job? I shall ask Steve to telephone to Mr Ruhu and tell him everything. If I lose my job those girls will laugh at me!

“Mr Manager,” Steve said, “I have met with a misfortune.”

“What is it, Mr Dota?”

“My car was stolen last night.”

“Your car? From here?” the manager said surprised, as if his place was theft-proof.

“Yes. According to the night watchman, my car was seen being driven away by one of three Africans who came in late yesterday.”

“I told you that some boys come here to cause trouble and...”

“OK. Thanks. Well, I want to check on their names.”

“Please do. But this is very bad. The whole country is infested with this disease of stealing. Nothing is safe.”

Steve checked in the book and put down their names and addresses. His handsome face was covered with sweat and there was a deep wrinkle running across his brow making him more serious. I felt an impulse to grab his face and kiss it so as to console him but fear of what he might do held me back.

“I hope their addresses will help you. But such crooks are not fools. They might have used false names,” the manager said in sympathy.

“You have no way of finding that out?”

“Of course you know that we always demand the identity of every customer before we give him accommodation, but that's not enough.”

“Well, I'm sure I'll track them down.” He turned and looked at me. I forced a smile which I think was repelling for he looked away quickly.

“Mr Manager, how does one get transport from here? Any chance?”

“Well, if you are lucky you can get someone stopping over here and proceeding to the city. Otherwise you may have to wait for a bus tomorrow.”

“I hope it is regular.”

“Yes it is regular in its own way. It is in the garage for repairs more often than it is on the road. But when it is on the road it really helps many people.”

Steve looked at me and smiled: that kind of smile you give as the only measure to save you from collapsing.

“Steve, can we inform Mr Ruhu that I may be late for duty?”

“You won't be late for duty, dear. We shall arrive in time. In any case the telephone in his house has been out of order for as long as I can remember, and today is Sunday. And most probably he is not in the office.”

I looked at my watch only to see it was approaching eleven. I began to wonder whether we would get transport. Steve ran around asking the tourists for a lift to the city, but most of them said that nobody was hurrying to that lifeless enclosure. Those who were leaving after lunch had no extra room. He was advised to wait for another bunch of tourists who would probably be coming in two days' time. No doubt, there would be room in their vans.

As we sat in the reception room we saw a car pulling in and an African with a pretty woman came out. Steve ran to them and it seemed his legs spelt hope of rescue by a fellow African. I saw him talking to the man in what appeared to be the most humble way. But then I saw the man shaking his head. He held out his hand for the woman to hold and they walked into the dining room.

“Are they going to the city?” I asked anxiously after he had talked to them.

“Yes, but they can't take us. They are on a honeymoon and as such an extra person would spoil their romance,” he said and closed his eyes. I could not tell what was on his mind. I now know that we are all individuals in the final analysis, more so when we are in difficulties. You cry for someone's help but that someone pushes you away into your separate shell.

Lunchtime found us at Alibo Hotel waiting for someone to help us. I had no appetite for any food but Steve forced me to eat something. A few tables from us sat the couple on honeymoon. They were feeding each other. The man would feed the woman and the woman would feed the man in turn. Their faces wore the sunshine of happiness. I wished that I could get a chance of enjoying myself to that extent. But with my pre-marital pregnancy chances were very slim. Steve kept an eye on them and when they left the room he followed them. I came after him, and found him begging them again for a lift to the capital.

“You see,” he said, “I am on a honeymoon also, but I was so unfortunate in that my car got stolen last night.” Steve told half lies and half truth.

“What a pity,” the man said with no commitment.

“Darling, that would be the worst thing to happen to us. What could we do if it happened?” the woman asked innocently.

“I suppose we would extend our honeymoon here and enjoy the beauty of this wonderful place,” the man said as he opened the door of the car for his lady.

“I wouldn't mind about myself. Help my lady and I'll be most grateful,” Steve begged.

The man gave a dry laugh, and said: “You see, I planned for this honeymoon about two years ago, and unfortunately I didn't leave any room for taking other people who might be stranded on the way. You were not in the plan,” he said gently but acidly and released the clutch. Before we could take in the message, he was gone.

We looked at each other and burst into laughter. I leaned on him and he held me to his side, squeezing me a little. That was when I learnt that laughter is medicine. It healed our anxiety at least for a while.

“Yes. He is right. When he was planning for his honeymoon our room in his car was not reserved,” he told me close to my ear, and then asked me to walk to the main road where we could possibly stop any vehicle going to the city. It took us about an hour to walk the distance from the Alibo Hotel to the main road. As soon as we reached the main road a car came along at high speed. Steve stopped it but it continued for about two hundred yards from where we were. We ran towards it and by the time we reached it, I had little air left in my lungs. Steve asked the driver if he could give us a lift to the city, but the driver replied that he was not going to the city. He was going to a small town called Buleti which was twenty miles off the main road. And so he continued on his way.

We waited for another hour under the hot sun and I felt like sleeping. Steve advised me to have a rest under a tree and said that he would wake me up if any vehicle came. I agreed and took a short nap. I dreamed about many things which I couldn't sort out when I woke up. In the midst of the dreams, Steve shook me awake and I sprang up to see a big lorry standing by me.

“Come on Flora. Climb up into the lorry.”

The driver was looking at me with his mouth open. I realized, rather too late, that the length of my thigh up to the knickers level was showing. I hurried to readjust my dress and then followed Steve. He helped me into the back of the lorry and we sat among sacks of charcoal. There was someone else on the lorry, besides us.

“We are lucky, Flora Its going to the city. More so, to the market quite close to my brother's house. Now make yourself comfortable and continue your sleep.” He smiled, and the wrinkle on his face was getting thinner and thinner.

Our neighbour was indistinguishable from the charcoal. He was lying on his back cushioning his head with his hands. He kept on whistling different tunes of pop music, most of which he produced distortedly. We learnt later that he was the turn boy of the lorry. He whistled tune after tune, and once in a while he would hum the tune or even mutter a line or two of a song. He gave me the impression that he was enjoying himself. Or at least that that was the best thing to do: to appear comfortable and accept the circumstances.

But I could not pretend that I was comfortable. The sack of charcoal on which I was sitting was as hard as a heap of stones, and the coarseness dug deep into my buttocks. I kept on fidgeting and changing the position of my bottom every now and then. Steve offered his lap for me to sit on, but I refused. I appreciated his concern about my comfort but then, sitting on him would be going too far. He was not any more comfortable than I was.

“Madam,” the turn boy said, “you can use my bed here. It is more comfortable than the sack of charcoal. My buttocks are hard enough for the sack, unlike yours.”

Steve looked at him and smiled. “Thank you,” he said. “Flora, I'm sure you won't mind.”

I looked at him with a face that says 'I accept'. But I wanted to refuse the offer for I couldn't imagine what could be in the 'bed' of a person of the turn boy’s appearance. Bed bugs, lice, fleas and other vermin came to my mind. Before I could decide, the turn boy left his place and came to where Steve and I were. Half-heartedly, I moved to his 'bed' and lay on it. Certainly it was a lot more comfortable than a sack of charcoal. It was made of a collection of old clothes - shirts, shorts, pieces of bed sheets, underwear, grass, anything. And on top of these was spread a torn raincoat.

“Do you have a cigarette, sir?”

“Oh yes, I remember having some but I don't know whether I smoked them all.” Steve checked in his coat and produced a packet of cigarettes. He gave him one cigarette and he smoked another. I looked at the turn boy and thanked him deep in my heart for the kindness. My mind referred me to the honeymoon couple who had refused to help us. I began to compare. The turn boy, as a human being, was purer than the couple. Poor as he was and still less educated, he was a much better person to live with in this world. He was selfless and kind. He had stepped out of his 'bed' so that I, a stranger, should be more comfortable. As I write these words, a quotation from the *Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare rings in my heart. 'The quality of Mercy is not strained' - but alas, the quality of mercy and kindness and humanity has been destroyed in our society by the so-called civilization.

“When do you think we shall arrive?” Steve asked.

“What is the time now?”

“It is about four p.m.”

“It usually takes us seven hours. If we don't stop, we shall be in the city by midnight.”

“That's OK.”

“Yes. But there is a bad part of the road ahead of us which might delay us. If we can reach there before it is dark then we shall arrive in the city even before midnight.”

“Is it far from here?” Steve sustained the conversation. I was feeling sleepy again. I didn't know what was happening to me, but I suspected pregnancy to be the cause.

“Not far from here. I think that's why he is driving fast. After passing that spot we shall be all right. And it is better to be there before it is dark. We were lucky this morning. You see, it is funny. Heavy vehicles pass there more easily than light vehicles.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Can I have another cigarette? It is difficult to get cigarettes these days, especially when you are doing our kind of job.”

Steve gave him one and lit it for him.

I kept on looking at the two men. Steve looked very tired but wanted to show some politeness to the turn boy, which he honestly owed him.

“We found a Colt car stuck in the ditch this morning. I don't know whether the driver has managed to get it out.”

“A Colt car?” There was a tone of urgency in Steve's voice.

“Yes. We asked them to give us a hundred shillings to pull them out but they refused.”

“Them? How many were they?”

“They were three. They had a Volkswagen also. Volkswagens are good on such roads.”

I saw Steve's eyes widen. My heart beat faster and faster. Those must be the thieves. We must catch them.

“That must be a friend of mine,” Steve said. “Was the Volkswagen blue?”

“Yes. Is you friend the short one or the tall and thin one?”

“Well, I am not sure whether he is the one, but I am hoping he is not. Because he was going to the city to attend a very important meeting.”

“We know the short one and that's why we stopped to help him. But he is so mean that he couldn't give us a hundred shillings. That is the trouble with these taxi drivers. They like money so much that they can't part with it.”

A taxi driver! Could he be the one who was driving the car in which I was raped? We must catch them, I hope we find them there. How will they behave? Steve will fight them all and will take them to the police and they will be imprisoned. We shall catch them.

Steve kept quiet for some time and then said, “For how long have you known this taxi driver friend of yours?”

“About six years. I was his broker. But as I told you he is a miser. Giving you five shillings is a battle.” He laughed, and then pulled on the cigarette.

“Such men know how to make money,” Steve commented as he pulled out another cigarette for the turn boy. “By the way, what is your name? Mine is Dota.”

“I am Komposita!” He laughed. “You don't know why I'm laughing. You see, my mother gave birth to me in a place where they throw rubbish in the city. She ran away and left me there. Some man found me there a few hours old and took me to the police. When they asked him where he had found me, he said in the 'Komposita!' And everybody laughed and called me Komposita.” He laughed and we couldn't help laughing too.

“You see, I want to do a taxi business, and I am looking for a good driver. Can you get me one?”

“I have grown up in a world of vehicles, new and old, but the fanny thing is that I can't drive. However, I will get you one, definitely. I wish I could drive; I would take the job.”

“How about your friend?”

“Aa! That one is bad. He will steal all your money. I will get you an honest man.”

“Now what we can do, just bring him to my office so that I can see him. I shall interview him. At the same time, you will be looking for another one who I'll also interview. Like that, like that.”

“OK. If you show me your office I'll bring him. He likes money and I am sure when he hears of such a chance of cheating he won't refuse to come.”

“Bring him any time this week. I'll show you my office when we reach the city.”

As the men talked, the lorry tore through the air as if it was a car. Very fast. But after a mile or two the speed lessened.

“We are approaching the spot. Let me go and direct him,” the turnboy said.

Presently, the lorry came to a dead stop, the turn boy climbed out, and I prayed that we would manage to get through that area. Skillfully the driver pulled the lorry out of a hundred-yard muddy stretch, and then parked it on the side of the road.

The driver came to us and told us that someone's car was stuck in the mud, and could we give a hand in pushing it out?

“My goodness, it looks as if it is the honeymooning couple!” Steve exclaimed, as he looked out.

“Don't go there,” I said, overwhelmed by a torrent of anger and hatred. “Leave them to suffer.” I almost ordered Steve.

“No. Let's help them. They hadn't planned for this in their honeymoon, either.”

“That's right then. Leave them.”

“No. This will teach them a lesson. There are things we can't plan for or get prepared for. And these are many. The best preparation is to have a kind and forgiving heart.”

“They don't have it and therefore they don't deserve another,” I said to myself, for Steve had jumped off the lorry and was already pushing the car. The pretty lady was standing away from the mud, holding her pretty dress above her knees to avoid the dirt. The gentleman could not be recognized. His clothes were as clean as mud itself. It seems he had slipped into the mud more than ten times. It took them about thirty minutes to push the car out of the dangerous zone.

The gentleman thanked them profusely.

“We have been here for about four hours and I had lost hope of any rescue. I really don't know what I would have done without your help,” he said.

“Quite so. For this is not a beautiful place where you would have extended your honeymoon,” Steve said, looking him straight in the eye.

“I am sorry my friend for what I said I think it was a premature statement,” the gentleman said as he extended a hand to Steve, who accepted it and shook it.

“It was,” Steve replied, “but then I don't blame you. What you said was suitable under the circumstances, and what you are telling me is suitable under these circumstances. Enjoy your honeymoon, and I'm enjoying mine off the back of the lorry.” He smiled at him and joined me.

The journey from this point was rather long but not eventful. Soon it was dark and chilly. Steve offered to give me his coat but I refused. However, when he insisted, we reached a compromise. He gave me his coat and I gave him my sweater. The turn boy removed his raincoat from the bed and used it as a warm wrapper against the chill. And so I was left to sleep on his old clothes. For some time I resisted the allurements of sleep lest I should snore or pass wind in the presence of the turn boy. But then who can resist the forces of sleep if it means business? I think I was lucky, for I woke up when the city lights struck my eyes.

“Madam, you must be sick. How can you sleep for so long on a journey like this?” the turn boy said.

“It is your fault; your 'bed' is so comfortable that I couldn't help sleeping,” I said and thanked him for the kindness.

“I'm sure the warmth you have put in it will take me through another month!” he laughed as he helped me out of the lorry. Then he added, “Good night Madam, and look after your husband well.”

When Steve's brother opened the door for us he almost ran away, thinking that we were bundles of soot assuming the shapes of persons. They urged us to bathe before we went to bed, but we were too tired to do so. We fell into bed like sacks of charcoal only to wake up in the afternoon of the following day.

**Chapter Seven**

A month after the National Park incident, I began to worry about myself. This was because I could not hide the fact that I was pregnant. All my clothes were getting smaller at a high rate. Many more people looked at me curiously. At least I thought so. But very soon they would stop doing so. They would accept the fact. The truth was that I didn't want them to accept the fact nor did I. It was a shattering experience whenever I looked at myself. But I was pregnant. What next? I would ask myself now and then. What was I to do about it, me Flora, a fatherless daughter of a poor mother? A dependant on a single sister? Should I let the poor little thing grow into a full person and bring it out into this world? Well, was that a sensible thing to do? Was it easy anyway? There I was, the would-be mother. But who was the father? Up to that time I could not be sure of the father of the child. It could have been Mike, my sister's boyfriend. It could have been Tom. It could have been the *mzungu* and, my God! it could have been the thug who raped me. I was confused.

All the time, however, I wished it were Steve. He was a good man. Good enough to be a husband, a father of my child, and a masculine companion. He should have been the man. But he was not, for I had met him when I was already pregnant. What could I do? I had told my sister about my difficulties, who had finally changed her mind and agreed that I should abort. She promised to help me in the matter. But I had no courage. I had learnt that abortions were not easy things to rush into. There were many records showing girls who had died in the course of aborting. I wondered whether I would be the exception. Further, I had learned that abortions could render a woman sterile, and worse still, one would be prone to cancer of the uterus.

“Do you think I should tell Steve about it?” I asked my sister one day.

“What do you think he will do?” I looked away, not knowing what to do. “Obviously, it is not his child.” she said.

“I know.”

She said nothing.

I played music on a record-player hoping that it would bury my burden of worries. Unconsciously, I chose 'Across the River There's no Sorrow' - by Jim Reeves. My God! I wished I were across that river where there was no sorrow. I wished I were away from this world, and away from myself. I wished I were dead. Stone dead and buried under the dust and forgotten forever. What use was it to live if the good things I had enjoyed put me into trouble? How could the excitement of sex - its honeyness and beauty - put me in such a maze of difficulties? Why Flora of all people? Why? Why me? I broke down and cried.

“Look girl, crying won't help.”

“Leave me alone!”

“I won't. I'll stay with you. You need me and I need you. You are my sister. The only sister I have in this world. I need you and you need me,” she said softly.

When I heard her soothing words, I cried the more - not because of anger or despair but because of her tenderness and selflessness. Her soft voice, the misty eyes gazing at me, the feminine warm arms stretching out to comfort me, all captivated me so much that I rushed into her arms and sobbed like a child. In honesty, I wished I were a child again. The world, this world, was becoming too hard for me. It was becoming too rough for my young heart. I needed a guide, someone to protect me from the thorny problems of this world. Amidst my sobs, I remembered the enviable care I had got from my mother and close relatives. I used to cry whenever I wanted something and I would get it at times. I could even get more. I could get that priceless physical presence of my mother to which I could run for protection. But as I sobbed in my sister's arms, I realised that I had grown into a woman. I was carrying someone in my belly and I had outgrown the need to run to a mother for protection all the time. Not that she had ceased to be my mother, but rather the enemies were too strong for her.

Society had taken over the role of protecting the individuals, especially the weak ones like me. But, ironically, society was the enemy of the individual. Society, the whole system, was its own enemy. God help us all!

“Jane,” I mustered courage.

“Hm.”

“Is there no other way of aborting?”

“I told you my dear, you can't have it done in the hospital.”

“Why?”

“It is illegal to abort. At least in this country.”

“But I understand these people dealing with family planning can help.”

“I'm not sure. Even then you must be with a family you are planning for.”

“But can't I say that I am married?”

“Yes, you can. But you will have to prove that you are married” I said nothing. “What do you have in mind Flo?”

“Steve,” I said abruptly.

“To be taken for your husband?”

I nodded.

“You trust him too much.”

“Let us tell him. He might help.”

“Why bother the handsome thing? You know he is innocent, after all.”

“But I am innocent too. I didn't wish to get pregnant. I mean, I'm just unlucky. I have been unlucky ever since I was born. I am unlucky. Why me? Why me?” I cried.

“Flora! Flora! Hold yourself together young girl. There is someone coming. Calm down. Go to the bedroom. Quick! Don't let anyone see you with all those tears on your face.”

I went to my bedroom, sobbing. And after a while I heard voices in the sitting room. They were strange voices, except one. It was Steve's voice. How appropriate!

“This is her sister?” one roared.

“Yes. This is Jane,” Steve said.

“I am a police officer,” the other voice said. I froze with fear.

“You are welcome,” I heard Jane's voice ringing.

“They want to speak to Flora,” Steve said.

I covered myself with a blanket. What do they want to speak to me about? Not the pregnancy, definitely. I haven't aborted yet, and they can't know that I was planning to. How can they? How can the police know my thoughts? Not them. But they are intelligent people. And yet there is a limit. They certainly can't tell what is in my mind? They can't. They can't, unless they are as good as those I read about in Orwell's book. Was it *1984*? I think it was. I had read that everything that was planned by any individual would be known by the authorities. Everybody was all the time in front of some kind of television camera. But not here. Not here yet, I think.

“Flora!” Someone shook me out of my reverie. “Flora!” It was Steve.

“Yes?” I sighed.

“What is the matter? I am told you are sick.”

“Yes, I am unwell.”

“Fever?”

“Yes.”

He touched my forehead and wrist as a doctor would and then sat near me on the bed.

“You are hot! My goodness, what's this disease?”

“I don't know. I think it is fever.”

He looked into my face and said nothing.

“Who are those people?” I asked.

“They are policemen.”

“What do they want?”

“They are helping me to trace my car. They want to speak to you. To ask you a few questions. Do you mind them coming here?”

I said nothing.

I wouldn't mind helping Steve. After all, he was the only man close to me, and so why not help him?

“You don't mind Flora?”

“No. They can come in.”

“Thanks Flora,” he said and went back to the sitting room. Moments later, he entered with two men in civilian clothes.

My God! These must be the CID brutes. I was told at school that the CID men don't dress in police uniform!

“This is the young lady?”

“Yes,” Steve answered matter-of-factly. The question was not necessary as he had explained everything while in the sitting room.

“Look, young lady. What is your name again?”

“Flora,” I said.

“Flora. Yes, Flora. We want to ask you a few questions in connection with some people. Do you object?”

I looked at Steve.

“Of course she doesn't,” Jane said.

“Now look, young lady, we would wish to give your sister the opportunity to answer for herself. Would you oblige?” the policeman addressed Jane.

“I do,” Jane said quickly.

“Do you object, young lady?” the policeman turned to me.

“No,” I said.

“OK. Do you know these men?” He showed me three photographs.

“Yes,” I said quickly. One was Kit, another one Tom, and the third one was the driver who took me to the *mzungu* man.

“How did you come to know them?”

I said nothing. How could I say anything about Tom and Kit in this connection in front of Steve?

“Well, do you know their names?” the policeman insisted.

“Yes. Two of them. I don't know the third one.”

“Who are they?”

“This one is Tom and the other one is Kit. I don't know the name of the third one.”

“Are they your friends?”

“No.”

“No?” one of the policemen said angrily.

“Well, they were sometime ago, but we are not friends anymore.”

“Why?”

“Because the friendship stopped.”

“For how long were you friends?”

“Four months.”

“I see.”

“What has happened to them?” I asked.

“Never mind. Do you know where they live?”

“No.”

“How did you used to meet?”

“Well, well,” I stammered.

“You must not tell a lie,” one of the policemen warned me.

“They used to give me lifts in their car on my way from school.”

“Nothing else?”

“No.”

“I mean, no outing, nothing?”

I said nothing. I thought I had to tell them anyway, but perhaps in a way which could not damage my relationship with Steve. I felt I was beginning to perspire and Jane was quick to see that, for she mopped my face.

“Well, at first they wanted to make friends with me, but I refused. Then they asked me if I could get them girlfriends.”

“Did you get them the girls?”

“Sometimes, yes. But the girls kept on running away from them. And every time they ran away these men came to me for more help.”

“Did you like their company?”

“No. I tried to run away from them, but even' time they were chasing me.”

“Do you know where they might be now?”

“No.”

“OK. Thank you young lady.”

“Thank you sirs.”

“One small thing, though. How did you happen to be at a certain *mzungu's*home when his car was stolen?”

I looked at them hollowly. My God, how can I explain this? This will definitely make Steve know my wicked ways and he will leave me. How can I dodge that one? I cleared my throat and kept quiet.

“Any comments young lady?”

“You see, when I refused to go with them they kept on pestering me until I decided to make a deal with them. I would agree to sleep with them if they got me a job. So they arranged to get me a job through that *mzungu*man. But he also wanted me before he would give me the job. That night they had taken me to the *mzungu* man. It was the man in the photograph who was driving. It was a Datsun car. But when I reached there, I refused to sleep with the *mzungu* and I never got the job as a result.” I told half lies and half truth, and by luck, I did it well.

“I see. But when Mr Lupoi's car got stolen, you were with him in a hotel.”

I yawned to give myself enough time to think about that most tricky situation. What could I say? Steve had been watching me closely throughout the interview. His eyes were as strong as they were attractive. I could not tell whether he was sifting the truth from the pack of lies I was telling.

“You see, it's almost the same story. They never gave me time to breathe. For instance that night Mr Lupoi had requested me to go with him to the night club to see one of the most popular bands which had just arrived in the city. But before we settled down, those two men came to us and I didn't like their company. So we had to shift to another place.”

“To a hotel room?”

“Well, you know what men are like.”

They laughed, except Steve.

“Not that he did anything to me,” I said quickly, “for I knew he couldn't do anything as I was in my period. So, in order not to disappoint him, we went to that place for him to find out for himself that he could do nothing.”

“When you came out, you found the car already gone?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you very much for your cooperation.”

The policemen went away. I couldn't believe it. I mean, the way I managed to get out of it all. But had I got out of it all? I couldn't be sure. Maybe those were just preliminaries. They would come back to me for more information, or something of the sort.

What a lot of trouble I had created for myself! What a mess! Well, I had done it just for fun or for enjoyment, really. But I couldn't sort myself out when it came to the consequences. What was I to do? There I was pregnant with a child whose father I couldn't tell! Then all of a sudden, there comes along another problem of being identified with a gang of robbers. What a girl! Why me? Why Flora of all people? Why? How? Why? Why? Why? I cried again.

“Flora, what is the matter?”

I kept on crying. I couldn't recognise the voice well.

“Flora.” Steve shook me. I looked at him. “Don't cry. Your eyes are red with crying. My goodness, this can't be because of the illness.”

“I'm unwell.”

“You look it. We could take you to the hospital. Jane, what do you think?” he asked.

“No. I don't want to go to the hospital. I want to stay here. I want to die!” I cried.

“Come Flora. Don't begin talking like this. Come on. Tell me. What is the matter?”

I looked at Jane who was as grim as a beggar.

She looked at Steve and then looked at me again. After that she left the room. Steve remained in my bedroom and I felt a bit better. Better in the sense that at least only one pair of eyes were looking at me. Each eye seemed to represent a witness against my iniquities. I felt dejected and a failure in life.

“What is the matter?”

“I am pregnant,” I told him point-blank.

“I see.” I said nothing, but hid my face in my hands. “When did you know it?”

“As soon as I missed my period.”

“When was that?”

“You know of course.”

“How? How Flora?”

“You remember when we did it.”

“I see.”

“I don't know what to do, Steve,” I sobbed.

“I don't know either.” I stopped sobbing and looked at him.

“Flora,” he called. “Do you want the child? I mean, can you be a mother?”

“No,” I said frankly. I didn't want to be a mother yet. After all, who would be the father?

“Then let's remove it.”

“Yes.”

“You agree?”

“Yes,” I replied firmly. That was exactly what I wanted.

“Then we shall do it tomorrow,” he said and marched away quickly. I cried again.

The following day was another day I will not forget in my life. All had been set for the occasion. There was an elderly woman in the house who talked a bit too much. My sister and I watched her in complete silence.

“Take her to her bed,” she ordered my sister. Her voice was as coarse as the whisper of a colonel. What was happening now? I asked myself. She darted from here to there pretending, maybe not, to mix and measure the medicine whose destiny was to be my poor stomach. I looked on with intense fear.

“Are you going to use the medicine only or would you do the piercing bit as well?” my sister asked. I caught the words as I was disappearing into my bedroom. I felt the whole of my body itching with uncomfortable warmth. That kind of feeling which you get when you are going to sleep with a man who is a stranger to you. I mean, that kind of curiosity which places you at the receiving end of come-what-may. But there was more to that discomfort, for my clothes began to stick on me.

My God, I was sweating! This crude world. How come that I sweat in the early morning when I should be wrapping myself in thicker clothes? No, my friend. It was not warm. Not at all. I was warm with fear. I was afraid of the future. I was getting nervous about what I might be in a few moments. I did not know what to guess. I did not want to speculate about what might happen. I tried to avoid the whole idea. To avoid the future. I pushed myself into the past, but I couldn't fit in there. The past was past. I tried to remember good things in the past, but those good things could not help me in my present state. I mean, the past rejected me and I had to accept the present events. But, how could I accept such an ordeal? It was too much for me, for it is difficult to depend on the present. You just cannot get hold of it. I mean the so-called present. Either it is the past or it is the future of the past. The present is caught between that acrobatic sense of time and before you realise that you are someone, you will have changed. Nothing is the same ever again. We go on changing for worse or for better. For better? My God! I have not seen that happen to me. It is always for worse as far as I know. Nothing better. Nothing at all. It is always worse than the other time. Perhaps the better bit is when it is just less worse. I think that is better than worse. Now, what is my future? I know my past. It is always worse than the remote past. What is my future?

“Don't do it again,” the elderly woman told me point-blank. Girl, how I hated her there and then! What right had she to tell me that? All she had to do was to give me whatever she was to prescribe for me. Apart from that she had no right to say anything more. I wanted to tell her what I thought of her - a witch. But I stopped myself in time, for I was not sure whether or not she was only a witch.

“Give me the medicine, grandma,” I said, trying to hide my hatred.

“Now sit up. Drink this at once, finish it up before I count up to nine.”

“What?”

“Listen woman! As you drink, I'll count my fingers, and when I say nine you must finish all the contents. Not a drop to be left.”

I nodded.

She gave me a mug full of a substance of a greenish-black colour. I nearly vomited when I saw my breakfast.

“Now drink.”

I hesitated. What use is it to take this stuff? Is all my hope in this mug of crushed herbs? What if I refuse?

“Jane!” I cried out. “Jane! Jane!”

“Take the thing Flora. It's all right. No harm,” Jane called back.

I said nothing.

“Now I'll count. One, two, three...”

I looked at her with disgust. That kind of disgust you transfer from yourself to someone else who is completely innocent.

“Four, five...” she counted. She was unperturbed by my rebellious attitude. When she counted up to six, I jerked myself into surrender and put the mug to my mouth. My God, it smells like crushed cockroaches! In a split second, however, I hurled the stuff into my tender stomach and by the time she said nine, there was no drop left in the mug. 'Girl, don't do it again!' That kind of voice rang deep in my consciousness, but before I could agree or disagree with the silent voice, I had lost my memory of everything.

It was around midday when I woke up from the deep sleep.

“Flora, Flora.”

I looked up. I saw nobody except the several figures you would see when you looked at yourself in a shallow, wavy stream.

“She will be all right,” a male voice said. I could see nobody clearly. I opened my eyes as wide as possible but nothing better came up. However, after some time, I began to see much clearer shapes of human beings.

One was Jane, another one was Steve.

“Flora!” He beamed at me. I forced a smile. “You’ll be all right,” he asserted. “Thanks.”

“She will be all right, although she was a bit stubborn at first.” I forced a smile as if to say that it was all over.

“You will be all right,” Steve said again and touched my arm.

Poor boy, he looks so concerned. I wish he knew that he is innocent. But, maybe he is only helping a poor, helpless, silly thing he happened to know. Maybe he is cursing himself for having met me. Maybe he is laughing at me. Maybe, maybe... oh well, whatever he thinks about me, it doesn't help now except that he has shown great sympathy for me. Not only sympathy, for he is going to pay for the whole operation whether it is successful or not. Sixty thousand shillings! My God! What a beast I am to make Steve pay for my mistakes! Well, not my mistakes; not only mine anyway. It is not my fault, you know. It is the fault of society. I am just unlucky: One of those girls to be caught up by bad luck in the stream of life; for I have known girls who have sex any time of the year, except during their periods. I mean, they never get pregnant in spite of what they do. But me, poor Flora, got it. And worse still. I don't know the father of the child. So, here I am drinking smelly herbs hoping to remove the little thing and become a girl again. Here I am indeed hoping to become the past, running away from the future, let alone the present, and, in my struggles to deceive the beholder, I have involved the beholder in the dirty game. Look at Jane. Poor girl. I don't know what I would do without her. Perhaps that is the only luck God ever sent to me. He sent me Jane to be my luck. She is a wonderful sister. Do you have such a sister? If you don't, don't bother answering. And if you do, don't either. Just respect her and the Almighty who created you so lucky. But one thing I know for sure is that I have learnt a lesson. If I go through this test I will never catch myself with any other man. Steve is my man and I hope he loves me as I love him. I would make the best wife for him. Lord, I am willing to change from the aimless Flora into a more serious woman. Experience is the best teacher.

“Is this all? I mean is the operation over?” Steve asked ignorantly.

“Yes. It should be over by now,” Jane explained. “The medicine will do the rest.”

“Jane,” I called out.

“Yes.”

“Why had she to count her fingers?”

“I don't know. But different people have different ways of doing things.”

I looked at her in silence.

“She counted up to nine?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“I think nine represents nine months of normal pregnancy. Well, before the abortion takes place or rather, before she could prescribe anything for abortion, she had to assume that the pregnancy was nine months old. After that assumption, then the abortion would take place as if one is giving birth to a child in normal circumstances,” Jane explained, but without conviction.

“That's crazy!” Steve exclaimed. “Anyhow, we hope all is normal. I'll come to see you tonight. Be good.”

“O.K. Steve. Thanks for all this trouble you are taking,” Jane said.

“Thank you,” I said weakly. “I don't know what I would do without you.”

“Oh, it is nothing. See you later.” He went out.

“Jane.”

“Yes.”

“Is this all? I mean, I heard you talking about the piercing bit. What is it about?”

“Well, don't worry your head about such unimportant things. You need your head to rest.”

“Please Jane, tell me.”

“Well, well. There are many ways of aborting and the piercing method happens to be one of them. This method of taking medicine is another one. There are many ways in fact. But all of them end up in abortion.”

“Which is the most dangerous method?”

“I don't know, but the one she used on you is the least dangerous. I mean, the piercing method is very painful. The operator must see to it that she kills the little thing by piercing into the uterus through the cervix. After piercing near the thing that way, some water or fluid will come out and the thing will die. When it dies, it will be easy for the patient to force it out by pressure exerted by abdominal muscles and so on.”

“How is it more dangerous than this one?”

“It is painful, my dear. And then all will depend on the one doing the piercing. She can pierce wrong things like the bladder or anything else, or the piercing may cause a wound down there and the wound may become septic as most of the objects they use are not sterilised. And such wounds are fatal in many cases. Or the piercing may cause a lot of bleeding which usually leads to death.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, this method, I mean the method she used, is a lot better in that there is no risk of what I have told you about.”

“OK. Thank you.”

“Now look Flora, you have to sleep, for you will need it.”

I said nothing.

She left the bedroom.

After some ten minutes, I fell asleep again. I woke up in the evening. Nothing had happened to me yet. But there was a tickling sensation inside me which bordered on stronger sensations of itching. It made me feel uncomfortable. I tried to ignore it by reading various magazines and looking at photographs in my album. That sort of thing kept me busy for some time. Jane brought in supper but I could not eat. I was hungry but I had no appetite. I looked at it and shook my head.

The tickling feeling was rapidly changing into something else more serious. Dull, heavy pain began to pump in the lower part of my stomach. By midnight, I could hardly lie in my bed. The pain increased and there seemed to be thorny hands in my belly wringing all the contents down there. Sometimes, the pain was like the slow deliberate cutting by a saw in the hands of a mischievous carpenter.

I groaned and screamed and did all sorts of things a poor girl would do in the circumstances. I stepped out of the bed, for instance, and pulled myself into a chair. I squeezed the width of my waist with my already trembling hands, and hoped to squash the source of pain. But that was to no avail. The pain increased, and the whole of the lower stomach was boiling with peppery pain. Towards the back there was a series of bites as if I had sat unknowingly in a city of safari ants. Terrible experience that one! The chair was not comfortable enough for me, and Jane persuaded me to enter my bed again. The bed was no longer comfortable either. The whole of my body was as hot as burning charcoal, and I was wet all over with sweat. I wished I could scrape the whole belly off me.

It was in the early hours of the morning that a flood of fluid issued from me. Jane had put a container near my bed over which I squatted and into which I directed the fluid. However, the climax was waiting for me. For after some few hours, something inside me thumped hard, and a heavy load of a muddy nature hit the neighborhood of the cervix. All this was very painful, but then, pain had become a normal thing to me. I was already part of it. I held the bed tightly as you would if you were me and then forced the little thing out. My God, I should not do it again!

In the end, the thing came out and dropped in the bucket. The little thing, wrapped in thick blood, was there as a testimony to my womanhood. And there I was, clutching my bed for support and running away from womanhood into girlhood again. But I reckoned that it was too late: the fact was there in my presence that I was no longer a girl. I was a woman, a half-mother whose half-child I had killed. The dead half-child was there in the bucket, and more blood was still streaming out of me drowning the poor thing in the depth of innocent death.

More blood, and blood and blood. I began to lose the grip on the bed, and the last thing I remembered was my sister holding me tightly under the armpits. Nothing more. Nothing.

**PART 11**

**Chapter Eight**

Five years later, many things had happened. One of the major changes was that I had joined the National University to read for a BA degree. Can you believe it? So the miracle happened and I had gone through the High School like fire in a wild bush. Yes, I was at the university reading History and Sociology. If you came to the campus you would see me with a smile from ear to ear, bubbling with ideas. You would definitely see me moving with a group of students searching for the truth diligently in every book of the university. Looking at me you would not fail to see the word success printed on my face and the same word always rang down in the cage of my body the moment I stopped for a while to scan the surroundings. I had succeeded in life. Life was meaningful and God had been kind to me, despite my rotten past.

The first day at the university was like any other day, except that I felt as if I had entered a church. A holy place. The feeling of 'holiness' was so pervading that I feared to cough aloud. I would suppress such things as coughing or sneezing as if they would annoy the great Mother of Saints. Even walking became a problem, especially when I saw other girls moving with graceful gaiety as if they had purchased it from far-off lands. But then even in such a strange community God is with you. You cannot always remain alone all the time. If I could not find my legs to walk like them, I could at least use my eyes to see who was coming or going. For, whom did I see but Jenifer! I don't think you know Jenifer. You remember the three girls I was working with in Mr Ruhu's office five years ago? One was Judith, another one Robinah, and the third one Jenifer. This was the Jenifer whom I saw seated right in front of me as we ate our first meal at the university.

“Jenifer!” my voice rang out, and as if by reflex action, I clamped my hand on my mouth in an attempt to stop the noise from disturbing the holiness. But it was too late. The sound was so naughty that it shot to the ceiling and then burst in the whole space of the room.

“Jenifer!” the echo came back to my ears and I felt like sinking under the dining table to avoid the unseen rebuking eyes of the university Saints.

“Flora, my dear!” Jenifer replied with eyes struggling with surprise.

“How are you?” we both said at the same time like a nursery recitation. We held our breath, literally, and then beamed at each other as if to declare our reunion.

“I am fine,” she said. “I can't believe my eyes though. I mean, it is gratifying to meet you again.”

“Thanks,” I said and glanced around to see who might have been listening. “You know, it is just wonderful to meet you here. Where did you get lost?”

“My dear, it is a long story. Perhaps let's talk about it when we are alone. In short, I've been everywhere!” She laughed.

I laughed with her. Someone asked me to pass salt to her, and I did. She thanked me gently. Another girl near me helped herself to more food and asked me if I would like to have more.

“No, thank you,” I said hesitantly; for I actually needed more food but I decided against it.

“It is delicious food,” she said.

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Then have more,” she insisted.

“Flora doesn't eat much,” Jenifer explained to the other girl.

“Oh, poor girl. You must eat while you are here. It is good for brain workers.” I agreed and said nothing.

“Incidentally,” Jenifer said, “this is Flora, a good friend of mine. And this is Ruth - also a good friend of mine.”

“Glad to meet you Flora,” Ruth said.

“I am glad to meet you too,” I replied.

“What have you come to read?” she asked.

“Arts: History, Sociology and English.”

“That's fine. Those seem to be popular subjects with arts students.”

“Ruth is reading Medicine,” Jenifer explained. “She is in her fourth year.”

“So she is about to be a doctor,” I put in, this time unconscious of the unseen eyes.

“My God, I wish you were right!” Ruth exclaimed. “This place is so tricky that you can't be sure of anything until you hold it in your hands.”

“Yes. I am afraid that's what many people tell me.” Jenifer confirmed.

“What are you going to read Jenifer?” I asked as we prepared to leave the table.

“Arts, like you, but different subjects. Economics, Geography and Political Science.”

“She wants to be a politician,” Ruth said.

“Is that so?” I asked, with interest.

“Of course not, to be a politician these days is like putting a noose around one's neck.” Jenifer explained as we went out.

“Yes,” I agreed.

I was not living in the university rooms. I lived in my house with my husband and our kid: a son whose name is Peter. That was another great change. As you can see I had assumed other responsibilities: student plus mother and housewife.

And marriage? Yes. I got properly married in church.

One day, a question was put to me. “Do you accept this man to be your husband?”

“Yes I do,” I said and steeled myself.

“Do you accept this woman to be your wife?” the same voice rang out, and I shivered. Is he going to say “No?” What if he says “No?” Then I must kill myself. No, I am sure he cannot let me down. He has always loved me. We have gone through difficult times together and I don't think this should be the time for him to desert me. He would have jilted me when I aborted, but he accepted me as I was. Since then I have been a faithful woman.

“Yes, I do,” Steve said firmly.

I felt my armpits welling with the sweat of relief and I heard a voice inside me saying that I was almost through with it all. I had heard stories about many weddings and some of them were encouraging and others were not so good. The most fresh in my mind was the one about a man who had married while on his studies abroad. During his vacation he left his wife in UK and came down to his country where he got involved with another woman. They agreed to get married and walked to the altar. Before the man of God announced them husband and wife, a voice of objection rang out from the congregation.

“I object to this marriage. That is my husband, and I am his wife.”

The man of God stopped the ceremony and invited the woman and the claimed husband to his rooms to solve the problem. A big question mark hung in the church, and the congregation began to fidget as needles of tension pricked. After about thirty minutes, the Reverend emerged from the conference to tell the people that due to circumstances which God himself could not avoid, the ceremony could not go on. The bride, who had been sobbing, let out a scream and obeyed the law of gravity. People slipped out of the church, each one with an expression of disappointment on his face. The next morning, the bride was found in her bed dead and cold, without any bodily injury.

Maybe Steve has such a wife, and she is coming at any time. If she comes and claims Steve, I will beat her up; I'll fight her and kill her! I thought with violence. Jane, who was standing near me, held me tightly and whispered to me: “Take it easy, there is no need to shake, sissy.”

“Is there anybody in the congregation who would object to the holy matrimony of these two people before me?” the man of God asked.

There was silence.

My heart jabbed against my ribs. Why was he asking too many questions? Someone close behind me coughed.

“Is there anyone in the congregation who objects to the holy matrimony between these people before me?” the Reverend asked again. The eye of my mind opened gradually to accept the dazzling light of the past, and I saw a group of men looking at me. I saw Tom gaping at me with a sneer. His eyes bit into me and I felt the pain right in my heart. I know you in and out, he seemed to be saying. Was he going to say that aloud in the church? What would the man of God say? Postpone the ceremony? No, Tom cannot claim me as his wife. He knew me as his girlfriend and that's all. He knew my body but not my spirit. Not my love. I did not love him. He cannot claim me as anything. But he kept on looking at me with accusing eyes as if to say that I had let him down. Then I saw Mike's face beaming at me. Mr Lupoi's face peered at me and shook as if in despair of ever possessing me. He only misused me! Many faces of men came and looked at me and then disappeared quickly into oblivion.

“You are now husband and wife,” the man of God put us together, Steve and Flora. We were one. Mr and Mrs Dota. Suddenly the wedding music filled the church like air pumped into a balloon and joyful voices joined in the song of marriage. I shifted my eyes from those before me and looked in Steve's face; and there he was, my handsome husband. He looked at me, squeezed my hand and whispered: “I love you, Flora.”

We marched out of the church. Steve and I, our hands locked in each other's and almost breathing the same breath. We were one-inseparable, except by death. “What God hath put together no man must put asunder,” the man of God had just warned and as we marched between two lines made by happy well-wishers, that warning repeated itself deep in my head. I'm sure everyone has got it right. I now belong to Steve and he belongs to me. There is no nonsense about this. All the men in my life, goodbye. The best you can get from me is a smile. Yes, everything now belongs to my man.

The sun shone brightly without hurting one's eyes, and beautiful gardens about the church lent their brilliance to the ceremony. Camera men asked us to smile for them and as we posed for a family photograph I felt happier than I had ever felt before. I had achieved what every woman, consciously or not, aspires to get.

The previous day my mother had mentioned something to me: “My child, for all your books what all of you should aim at is getting a man to marry.”

“Yes, Mama, I agree with you and that's why tomorrow is a big day,” I said.

“I thank God for this,” she said.

I kept quiet.

“Although Jane did not get married in church, she is married and lives with her man.”

“Yes, they are both happy, Mama.”

“I wish they had married in church. But then what am I talking about? God is the one who judges. I should be thanking him for all he has done for me. Nobody knew how I would bring you up after the death of your father. And-”

“Yes, Mama. God is with us.”

“A woman who does not get married is like a sorghum plant which grows with others but does not open its leaves for the sun to impregnate it. When the time of harvest comes others are taken and it is left in the dry garden alone to wither to death.”

“I think so, Mama.”

“If it is lucky, a drunkard might pluck its leaves to clean himself after shitting, or else it dies standing.”

“That is unfortunate, Mama.”

“That's true, my child. That is true. I'm very happy for you. You have opened your womanhood for new life. Let it keep you warm, and don't let anyone throw mud in it.”

“Of course not, Mama. You know this cannot happen. We love each other.”

“Yes. I know you have love for him and he is a good man the way I saw him. But I'm older than you and I have seen bad things happen with my two eyes.”

“I agree, Mama.”

“Yes, my head is now becoming white and I thank the Almighty.” I kept quiet. “You know what happened to Biti's daughter? She left her husband and went away with another man.”

“Yes, I was told the story.”

“That man she ran away with is no different from her husband except that he has more money. A big stomach stuffed with bad money.”

I stayed quiet. What was Mama up to? Did she see a possibility of such a thing happening to me? Not with me. I love Steve and I know he loves me.

“My child, I am a Christian but I am an African.” She looked away and threw more wood into the fire. My mind quickly raced to a university lecture-room where my professor would be talking about the 'Marriage between Africanity and Christianity.' Can one be both an African and a Christian at the same time or is one usually weaker than the other? “I'm a Christian, and yet I believe in witchcraft. I fear it because it exists.”

“I don't know, Mama.”

“All these people who are here tonight have come apparently to celebrate this occasion with us. Tomorrow you will begin a new life with your husband.”

“How was your wedding Mama?”

“There is no difference, my child. There is not much difference. There was a similar sense of festivity and many people from near and far came to say good-bye to me - as they have come to say good luck to you. There was so much meat to eat. My father was a chief, unlike yours, and he had killed two bulls and many goats. The whole week was spent on feasting. No one in the village saw a garden or held a hoe for many days.

“In those days wherever a daughter of a chief got married there was a lot to talk about. People danced, ate and drank to excess. Young boys too, grazing cattle, would bring the cows home long before the sun went to sleep so as to join others in the feasting. And naughty children took the opportunity to view the dark parts of drunken women. With their heads heavy with beer, those women would sit or lie down carelessly.” She laughed and I laughed with her.

“Yes. All relatives and friends from far off came, many of whom I had never seen before. Yes, all this happened on the day I got married. Your grandfather was a rich man, very generous and proud of his family. I wish he had lived long enough to see this day.”

“My father was also generous though poor. And I am sure he would have been happy today,” I said, feeling uncomfortable.

“Yes. He should have been alive today but people are not always good.”

“Why, Mama?”

“I am a Christian but I fear witchcraft. Your father did not die of malaria. Someone killed him from a distance.”

“No, Mama! I do not think my father was killed by a witch doctor. Surely the doctors say it was malaria which killed him.”

“I don't wish to talk about sad matters now when we should all be feasting. But let me tell you now because tomorrow you will be a woman, my child. Friendship is like honey. Honey is good in the mouth but it can change its mind when it reaches the stomach. Friends are good and that is what they are for. But they can be very bad when they change their minds.”

“You could be right, Mama.”

“Your father had a good friend called Betwa. They were good friends. He used to visit us quite often. But then all of a sudden, something happened and Betwa and your father could not fit in one house. They became enemies. He has never followed the path to the gate of this home again since then.”

“But Mama, witchcraft cannot work in such matters,” I said with conviction.

“Hmm. I'm a Christian and I say no. But I am an African and I say that Betwa sent his witchcraft to kill your father. An enemy who has been your friend knows your weakness.”

“But Mama!”

“Go and sleep, child, for tomorrow is your big day.”

I agreed and walked to my bedroom. I sat on my bed trying to find my bearings. What is all this mother is talking about? She has never talked to me like this and she has never appeared so serious. How can she believe in witchcraft? I thought she was a staunch Christian. Yes, she is. But she says she is an African also. What is all this on the day of my wedding?

I walked to the window and opened it. The compound was full of excitement. People were singing and dancing. A crowd of people moved up and down. While some produced music using harps, flutes and horns, others used drums, jingles and even hoes. All these instruments provided music that threw the neighbourhood into mass jubilation.

“Beat the drums, you people, beat them hard and hard!” a voice pierced through the heat and noise. It went up as it asked the people to dance a dance of thanksgiving to the ancestors for was their daughter not getting married to one of the big men in the country? A man ran into the arena. He threw his arms into the air and stamped the ground with his two heavy bare feet. Many people joined in the dance. The women sang songs of praise towards the living-dead and, in the same breath, praised and admired my mother for having given birth to a girl like me.

Tears sprang to my eyes. All these people are happy because of me? Because of my marriage? God, let me honour my marriage. Let me not let down all these people. Amen. I found myself kneeling beside my bed. Carefully, I opened my bed and stretched my whole length between the sheets. Moments later, I fell asleep.

I woke up the next day when the day was still very young and the air was cool. But the music still played in our compound. I found it difficult to sleep again. I kept my eyes open, looking up at the ceiling; and shadows like cobwebs kept dancing on it. Soon after, the early insects began to trill and some birds could be heard wishing good morning to their neighbours. The dawn was beginning to run into a clear morning with most of the sky blue. Cockerels had seen signs of the new day, and were crowing in high spirits. Cows, goats and sheep were also greeting the new clear day with hope for a big feed.

I tiptoed to Jane's room to check whether she was already awake. We had agreed that the bride's group would wake up early and begin preparations for going to church early.

“Flo, my dear, you look sleepy. Another hour's sleep won't harm you. I'll see to everything,” Jane went on with her elder-sister talk.

I yawned, and went back towards my room, but changed my mind and went to my mother's room. She seemed to be asleep and I walked back softly so as not to disturb her. Before I closed the door, she called me.

“Flora, my child.”

“Yes Mama.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. And you Mama?”

“I did my child, except that I have a pain in my back. But this is nothing to worry you. It always comes whenever it wants.”

“I'm sorry Mama.”

“You woke up early.”

“We want to start off early so that we can arrive in the city early.”

“Yes, you are right. But you need a rest before you start on a new life. There is no time to sleep when you become a wife.” She smiled at me. “And it will be worse when you become a mother.”

“As for me I will sleep,” I laughed and she laughed with me.

“Anyway, you'd better sleep because most of the people going with you are still in bed.”

“It is all right, Mama.” I went to my bed and tried to sleep.

As the bride's party boarded a bus to take them to church, a group of women dancers arrived at our home. They started dancing when they saw me on my way to a waiting car. Plants and grass still hosted a huge amount of morning dew, and the sun sent warm smiles to the village. It was not yet hot, but the dancers were beginning to feel hot. Streams of sweat rolled down their faces, and nobody bothered to wipe them away. The same streams ran down farther into the regions below. They danced and danced. The sweat can come and go anywhere it wants, they seemed to say.

“Good-bye, good-bye sister  
Your husband is a good man,  
But an arm does not grow  
To be taller than a shoulder,  
For here is your home.”

So they said and tears welled up in my eyes.

Steve held my arm fondly and flashed a smile at me.

“We have made it, darling. I was impressed by the turn-out of our friends,” he said as we fixed our safety belts when the aircraft started to accelerate for take-off.

We held our hands together for lack of words to express our happiness. We were heading to our secret spot for our honeymoon.

**Chapter Nine**

Going to our house, you would leave the main city behind you and drive for about two miles eastwards through a beautiful gardened area. Most of the houses are as big as eight classrooms and have two or more storeys. The place is called 'Wacha Kelele' and everybody knows the area as it is the only one for the rich and important people. Also, everybody in this area knows that the biggest house belongs to the French Ambassador. Next to the Ambassador's house is ours. It squats on an area of about an acre and has a swimming pool. The garden itself is about three acres of land. I am not boasting, but it is quite a place.

When there was a change in government, Steve was called back from the Diplomatic Service in Zaire. As he was a close friend of the President, he was given a new post as the Director of National Media Services. Directors here, as you know, are equivalent to ministers in neighbouring countries and we don't use the word Ministers. The President banned the use of the word because it was used by colonial masters as well as the government he had toppled. The word is imperialist. The other day, he suggested to church leaders that the word 'Ministers' in the church should be changed to 'Church Directors'. But people thought that he was only joking.

When I shared my amusement about the joke with Steve, he said: “I doubt whether it is a joke.”

“You mean it is true, darling?”

“Well, no one can predict.”

“Maybe it is a rumour.”

“Rumours or not, darling, we no longer have to bother about such decisions.”

I kept quiet and went to the kitchen.

My husband worked very hard. He used to go to his office around eight o'clock and would come home just after six o'clock. As I got my lunch at the university, he did not bother to go home for lunch to eat alone. So we only met in the evenings. He was healthy and he looked it, but he was becoming more taciturn even day. I suspected the cause was the load of work on his shoulders.

One day, we went together to see Prof Ruhu at the University. We found that he was not home but his houseboy told us that he had gone to buy beer to stock in his house and that he would not be long. As we were about to leave, we saw his Austin cruising towards us. He flung the door open and ran to the boot of the car, pulling out a case of beer.

“What is the hurry for?” Steve said.

“Oh, it is you Mr Director! I'm honoured to have you here,” he said as he shook hands with Steve. “How are you, my student?”

“I'm very well, thank you.” He always called me his student. Whether I was the Director's wife or not it didn't bother him. I was his student, and the rest came second or third.

“Come in, please, come in.”

“We came to say hello to you, and, since we have done so, we should go-if you don't mind,” Steve said.

“I don't mind really, if you want to go. I mean, I thank you for coming to see me. But since you have come you should look around our place. We feel favoured when we breathe the same air as you.” He laughed and scratched his balding head. Steve laughed, too.

“You must be feeling lonely, Professor,” I observed.

“Not so, not so, my student. Of course there are moments I need to exchange secret ideas with someone close, but then that is not always. I am a busy man; you see it is only idle men and women who get lonely.”

“Then I am wrong,” I said.

“Not necessarily. Not necessarily. We only differ in assessing whether or not I am lonely.”

“I don't follow you, I must say. But if you asked me, I would say that the Professor has quite a tight programme this evening,” Steve said teasingly.

“You are very right. Mr Director, allow me to ask you a rather naive question. You see this case of beer? Guess how I got it.”

“I trust my wife can help me out of this tricky situation,” Steve said, laughing.

“Of course you bought it, or you got it as a free gift,” I said.

“Or both! Both, my dear student,” he said laughing. “Yes. It was both, although theoretically it is impossible.”

We all laughed again.

“Yes. You see, the Manager of the National Breweries is a friend of mine. My former student here, actually. Today I rang him up and explained to him that my stock is depleted and how I could not, but any means, get access to a case of beer. Then he said: 'You know it is very difficult to get beer these days especially for individuals. The machines have broken down and no one can repair them. You see? So it is very difficult. Even the Directors are not getting their regular supply. But since you were my good lecturer, you know I'll help you.' I said thank you and asked him when I could collect the case. He said: 'You come after four-thirty, you know, when my boss has left. You see I'll give it to you as a gift. Let's call it the tenth anniversary of your marriage although you are a bachelor. That way it will be easy to answer any unprepared questions. But don't forget that you will buy it all the same.' I said that was very wonderful and kind of him. And he said, 'If you pay for half of the case and you don't demand a receipt then that's a deal.' I said OK! So after duty, I rushed there and got it.”

“Oh dear, I didn't know that it has come to that,” Steve said.

“Of course, it is because these days we don't drink, that's why we don't know,” I said.

“Another thing,” said Prof Ruhu, “I am rushing back to the same place, for his junior has promised me another case and I should collect it after the Manager has left!”

We laughed together.

“Was it Macbeth who said 'to be or not to be, that is the question'?”

“No, Professor!” laughed Steve. “Don't tell me that you have forgotten your books. It was Hamlet. Wasn't it darling?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Well, whoever said it, he said it for us all. I have no time for books these days for I have to run around and struggle to live. This drought has caused a shortage of everything.”

A strange feeling struck my heart and I shivered. I looked at Steve and found him looking at Prof Ruhu who was himself gazing at blankness in the sky. It was beginning to get dark, and there was no movement in the air. All the trees around looked like dark, tall, lifeless structures abandoned uncompleted by an architect. They stood towering over us as if listening to every word we were saying. The silence in the branches was ominous. There was no sign of life.

“And I'm going back now to collect that case.” said Prof Ruhu with a sigh.

“Well, I suggest that we go to my club and have a good chat there. Let's relax there, it is a good place,” Steve said.

“I am not being uncivil, but you see, I have to collect this beer. You know, well, I'm not sure whether you know. But my student here, maybe she knows. Well, we lost a fellow lecturer...”

“Yes I know,” I said.

“I am sorry,” said Steve.

“Yes. He was found by his small brother in his bedroom dead from a gunshot.”

“Oh, dear! Was it suicide, or do the police think otherwise?” Steve asked.

“Well, whatever the police or anybody thinks, the fact is that he is dead. He was a good man. Responsible, you know, and very sociable. Well, he is dead,” Prof Ruhu said, looking at the sky again.

“Might I know him?”

“Yes you might know him, darling,” I said. “He is Dr Kungu, a brother of Mr Kungu, the Manager of Alibo Hotel.”

“Oh Jesus Christ! Such a brain dead! Of course I know him. It is only a week ago when the two brothers came to my office to see me.”

“Yes. He was alive then and he is no longer,” said Prof Ruhu.

“Mr Kungu is a friend of mine. You remember the first time we met him, darling. And since then we have been friends. Oh God, what a big loss to the country!”

“That's right. A big loss to the country, but an irreparable loss to his family and friends and all those who valued him. Well, I must rush and get the case of beer for these bereaved people.”

“I think we should go together to the house of the deceased. As for the beer, you can give them this one and I shall make arrangements to send you one or two cases. This might save you the rigours of collecting that famous 'case of beer'!”

We drove to the house of the deceased and found the place full of people. Most women were crying, and the men tried to put on a brave face. But one could see their hearts were wrung with grief. When we entered the sitting room, they showed courtesy to us by standing and greeting us, although most of their greeting was a flat murmur.

“You are welcome, Mr Director,” said Mr Kungu, “although this is not the best occasion to welcome you.”

“I am sorry, Mr Kungu,” Steve said.

“It was a shock to me,” I added.

“Well, we are born to die,” Mr Kungu concluded philosophically. Silence followed.

“What I don't understand is why it happened to him of all people,” someone in a corner said in a broken voice.

“Not only him. If you listen to the radio carefully, you will find out that about ninety percent of announcements are about death of this type these days,” someone else explained. We were given beer, but Steve and I refused to drink alcohol. We took orange juice instead.

“And there are many more whose deaths are not announced. Those are the majority,” Prof Ruhu said.

Everybody nodded and said nothing.

“It is bad,” someone said. “The whole country is full of death. Even dogs are dying all over the country.”

Everybody agreed in murmurs and fell silent. The silence was, however, perforated with sobs from the inner rooms of the house. A cockroach walked across a table. We looked at it as it explored the emptiness of the surroundings.

“Can I use the telephone, Mr Kungu?” Steve asked.

“Please do,” Mr Kungu answered and at the same time, struck dead the insect with a newspaper.

Steve rang home and instructed our driver to bring five cases of beer to the bereaved family. Mr Kungu thanked him very much and wished him a long life. We said good-night to everybody in the sitting room and left the house. As we walked to the car, Prof Ruhu joined us together with Mr Kungu.

“Thanks for all you have done, Mr Director,” Mr Kungu said.

“I am sorry I couldn't do more than this, Mr Kungu. But if you need any help don't hesitate to come to me,” Steve said.

“Thank you sir.”

We left the place, all of us in silence. It was going to be a dark night as there was no moon, and not a single star showed. But there was no sign of rain.

“It is so humid. I think this kind of weather also affects the way we make vital decisions,” Prof Ruhu said.

“Yes,” I agreed absentmindedly. My mind was somewhere else. A few days back, my ayah had asked for permission to go and attend her uncle's funeral. I was very sorry for her and sent condolences to the bereaved family. When I asked her the cause of death, she said she didn't know but people said it was murder. I was beginning to ask myself why the incidence of death was so high. Why were people deciding to kill one another? What was the cause leading to this total disregard for God's creation? Had people reached a stage where they saw no purpose in life? Had purposelessness become the order of the day or was it just because of the humid weather?

“I wonder why you came back here, Steve,” Prof Ruhu broke the silence.

“Why? Of course you know.”

“No, I don't know. I don't know why you came back to this dying country.”

Silence followed. My mind flashed back to the day when I was waiting for Steve to come back from Zaire. It was such a long day that by the time the plane touched down I was tired of waiting. Many people, including his parents and friends, had been waiting for him at the airport.

Also, the president had sent a personal representative to welcome him home. We were all happy to receive him home. Prof Ruhu was there with us and was also happy to see him back. He was going to be a Director in the government of his country, and that was far better than being a mere Ambassador.

“Well, I think it is this kind of weather which is affecting us all, Professor. Otherwise, we shall be all right.”

“This is a fifty-fifty probability. Maybe we shall be all right, maybe not. But frankly, there is something wrong. People can't resort to killing wantonly unless there is a broken cog in the machinery of society.”

“Maybe there is nothing wrong. Maybe it is because we get bad news more often because of easy communication these days,” I put in without conviction.

“Steve,” Prof Ruhu continued, “you should not have come back.”

“Well, I came to work for my country, Professor,” Steve said lightly.

“True. All of us work for our country. But there is a time when you decide that the most important thing you have is yourself. Once you lose yourself then you have lost your country, everything”.

“I don't follow,” said Steve.

“All of us have lost ourselves, and we have lost our country. That is why these people are committing these crimes. There is nothing to live for. And we, you and I and my student, are mere shadows of time,” Prof Ruhu said as he stepped out of the car.

“If I were you, I would have a good rest and wake up fresh tomorrow,” Steve said, with laughter in his voice. We said good-bye to the Professor and left for home. It was around eight o'clock and the city looked deserted. Very few vehicles were moving and fewer people were walking about. One or two people could be seen either hurrying or running away from the city. But the city lights continued to bum. Nobody was making use of them except some insects dancing around the lamps. Their dancing attracted my attention so much that I drew Steve's attention to what I was looking at.

“You know a story behind those dancing insects?” he asked.

“No. You seem to have a story about everything, darling. You should have been a story-teller; perhaps a writer.”

“I'm neither and I'm happier.”

“One day, you should collect your stories into a book. They are very interesting.”

“This one is not. You see, it is about a butterfly. There was a great famine in his village and most people, well, butterflies really, were eating grass and leaves - if they could get them. It was a long drought like the one we have now. Then one day the butterfly heard a knock on the door and whom did he see but his father- and mother-in-law. It was a night like this one. The butterfly welcomed them and told them to wait for a while as he was going to call his wife who was at a neighbour's. As soon as he was out of sight he ran to the nearest fire to bum himself. To his disappointment, the fire could not bum him. And he kept on dancing round and round the fire hoping that it would have pity on him and bum him. But the fire refused.”

“Then what happened?” I asked.

“Well, that's the end of the story'!” He laughed and pinched my arm. We laughed together. It was really a wonderful experience to laugh with my husband. He was an honest man, for all the years he had spent in the double-faced Diplomatic Service.

As soon as we reached home the telephone rang. I answered it.

“Can I speak to the Honourable Director, please?”

“Who is speaking?”

“Mr Kungu. Dan Kungu. Sorry to disturb you, Madam. I'm sure this is not the right time to bother the Director. But I just wanted to talk to him for a minute or two.”

“It's all right really, Mr Kungu. Hold on for him.” I called Steve who asked me to keep on listening on my extension. It was not the first time I had done so as it was already becoming a habit for us to listen to calls simultaneously.

“Hello, sir. Sorry to disturb you at this late hour.”

“It's O.K.”

“You see, I'm not sure whether I should talk to you or not. I mean, on the phone,” Mr Kungu said.

“Then make up your mind, Mr Kungu.”

“Yes sir.”

“It is very personal?”

“It is sir, but then I'm not sure. I think it is personal.”

“Why don't you have a good rest, Mr Kungu? It must be the lack of sleep.”

“Yes sir, but then I can't help remembering what you told me the first time we met.”

“Yes? What was it I said?”

“You told me that this is our country and that let us laugh or cry in it.”

“Your memory must be very good, Mr Kungu.”

“Thank you. But you see, it is the crying part of it that makes me remember. I think this is a country to cry in. Sorry, Mr Director, to bore you.”

“It is all right, if you are not bored yourself.”

“I mean people like you who have a chance of staying out of this country are better off.”

“Oh well, perhaps let's talk more when we meet, or try to drop in my office for a chat. In the meantime, I suggest you have a rest.”

“Yes sir. Thank you for sparing these minutes for my sake. Good-night sir.”

“Good-night.”

I put down the receiver, and straight away walked to my bed. Some vague sense of fear danced in my heart and I felt like crying like a child for no apparent reason. I jumped out of bed and went to the bedroom of my son, who was already asleep. I kissed him good night, and then dragged myself into my bed. That night I did not sleep well.

A few weeks later, I got one of the roughest shocks in my life. It was approaching lunch time, and a group of students were leaving the library for their halls of residence for lunch. I was still finishing off a good chapter on the life of Hitler, when I saw Ruth wobbling towards me with other girls supporting her. She was crying. My goodness, what has happened? I asked myself. They came to me and said something that made my heart jump up and down.

“Your friend Jenifer is dead,” one of the girls said.

Then Ruth wailed.

“Jenifer! Dead?” I shouted at them as if it was their fault.

“She jumped out of her room to her death,” another girl explained amidst sobs.

“Of course not! That's a hoax. What do you think you are doing?” My voice went up and up and I had to control myself, otherwise I would have become hysterical.

Ruth looked a picture of misery and dejection. Her beautiful looks and her knowledge of medicine had left her as a whistle leaves a mouth. Grief was in every line of her face. I said “Excuse me” to them, rushed out of the library, and ran to where Jenifer used to stay. A crowd of people had collected at the scene of the accident and close to the body was a ring of policemen. As I approached, I heard my name being tossed around from mouth to mouth, and a way was made for me to the body of Jenifer.

“Mrs Dota?”

“Yes.”

“I'm Inspector Kabi. We just found a note in the deceased's room and it is addressed to you.”

“Let me have it then,” I said.

“No, not now. It is being photographed. You'll get it as soon as it is ready. In the meantime, we would like you to accompany us to the police station for a few questions.”

“Suppose I don't?” I hissed with anger. I don't know why, but I felt angry.

“Well, in that case, we shall persuade you to help us in this matter.”

I looked around and saw the wan faces of the crowd, like scarecrows gazing past my eyes. They looked like shadows with no life in them.

“Can I have a look at her first?”

“Well,” said the Inspector. “You can please yourself, but I would advise you not to bother as it isn't pleasant to see.” I looked at the blanket covering Jenifer's broken body and decided against seeing her smashed beautiful face.

“O.K. Let's go.”

One of the gentlemen who was with the policemen, came to me and said: “If you don't mind, madam, come with me to my car.”

I said nothing and followed him. I thought I had seen that gentleman before but I could not place him. My mind struggled to remember where I might have seen him but abandoned the exercise.

“Do you remember me, Madam?”

“You? No.”

“I mean, well, you are right. Things have changed.”

I looked at him again and I could not reject the feeling that I had seen him somewhere.

“My name is Komposita.”

“Komposita! You mean the Komposita I know?” I couldn't believe my mind which foolishly took me so many years back to a lorry full of charcoal. “No, of course not the Komposita I know. Maybe that is your brother, or your distant relation.”

“You mean the Komposita you met on top of the lorry full of charcoal?” he asked teasingly.

“Oh God! Komposita! God is marvellous. I'm glad to meet you. What are you doing with the police?”

“I am Deputy Chief Intelligence Officer in charge of all students in the country,” he said with a smile.

“Oh my God! That's something Mr Komposita. I'm very glad to meet you again.”

“Thank you Madam.”

I kept quiet. I was not in the best mood to talk, but curiosity urged me to ask him how he had managed to come up so quickly.

“The Director of Education is my cousin. The coup helped some of us!”

“I see.” I understood what it meant. Some people call it nepotism but in this case it was the extreme. How could Komposita become a Deputy Chief Intelligence Officer in a country where university graduates were failing to get jobs? Well, there he was holding the post and that was that.

“Madam, I have been trying to get in touch with you.”

“About my file?” I asked sarcastically.

“Not really. About something more important than that.”

“I see. I'm sure you realise that I'm a Director's wife and there are matters I shouldn't be involved in.”

“I don't follow you Madam, but then I think this matter is important because it concerns you as a Director's wife. As Hon Dota's wife, actually.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I don't think I should tell you now when we have this death on our mind. Maybe we can make arrangements to meet somewhere, if you don't mind, after you have finished with the police.”

“Is it so important? Why can't you talk it over with my husband?”

“No. The Honourable Director should not know it. It is good for you that he should not know it.”

“Why shouldn't my husband know what concerns me?” I was losing my temper. “You must be careful with your words, Mr. Komposita.”

“Madam, just trust me. I have unearthed some information; if only you could come to my office.”

I kept quiet. I had no patience to argue as my mind was on Jenifer's death, and so I said yes, I would see him the following day at 11 a.m.

We went straight to Inspector Kabi's office. He was seated at his desk and when we entered he stood up out of the habit of respect.

“I'm sorry about what has happened to your friend.”

“Can I sit down, please?” I asked.

“For sure, yes. Have a seat, Madam.”

“What are the questions, sir?”

“Well, no questions really. I just wanted to keep you away from the scene. But as for the note, this is the one.” He handed me a small note and I opened it.

“Sorry Flora, but I must go. There isn't much to live for. Don't cry for me. Jenifer.”

I folded the note carefully and put it in my bag. I tried to look brave, but stubborn tears of grief rolled down my cheeks. I hid my face in a handkerchief, but it was useless to pretend. I found myself crying like a child.

“Jenifer! Jenifer! You shouldn't have done this. How could you do such a thing!” I cried. The Inspector was before me, gazing at me. Apparently, he didn't know what to do for me.

“I'm sorry, Madam,” he said after I had cooled down. “She must have been a close friend of yours.”

I nodded amid sobs.

“Where are her parents?”

“You can get that information from the warden,” I said, standing up.

He nodded.

“I want a car to take me home.”

He stood up, walked to one of the rooms, and came back with another man.

“Take Mrs Dota to her residence now. She needs a rest,” he ordered him.

I could not believe that Jenifer was dead. Such a bright young woman. A woman who always showed great promise for a bright future. What prompted all this? Nothing much to live for? What does one live for? Love? But Jenifer had a boyfriend and they looked happy. They intended to get married after graduation. She had good and loving parents. She was a bright girl and popular. She was already a leader in her hall of residence. What made her decide to take her life? Not lack of money. Her father was one of the richest businessmen in the country and she always had enough money to spend. What made her kill herself?

“Thanks,” I said to the driver and walked straight to my bedroom. My head was drumming with pain and so I swallowed two tablets of painkiller. I got into bed and tried to sleep.

The following day, I went to Mr Komposita's office only to find that he had left a message requesting me to meet him at the Oval Hotel. I couldn't figure out why he had changed his mind. I debated whether to go or not as I had to make arrangements for going to Jenifer's funeral. Something from deep inside me urged me to go and meet Mr Komposita. The voice persuaded me that he was a sincere man and, most likely, he had something important to tell me.

And so I went to the Oval Hotel. I checked at the reception desk whether Mr Komposita had called, but they assured me that he had not come. I went to the bar room where I could get myself something to drink. It was almost empty, except for two men who sat at the counter. They looked like gentlemen by their attire. But a much closer look revealed that they were not so. On top of that, their faces looked drawn, with highly deflated cheeks. Their eyes were red and they smelt of damp old sweat. They spoke good English and the topic was 'women'. Prostitutes dominated the talk. Their voices would rise, but then they lapsed into disturbing whispers when they sensed that I was listening. Once in a while they sipped their drinks noisily and smacked their lips to show satisfaction. Soon they would get drunk, I thought.

Behind the counter stood another man who seemed to look at something in the distance beyond the other two men. His stare made me uneasy. Was he trying to puzzle out what might have brought a Director's wife to a bar at eleven o'clock in the morning? As if in a hypnotic trance, he pulled out a cigarette from an inner pocket of his jacket, lit it, and drew on it in a big way. That's better! I thought. It is always good to do something. At least he has something to do. It is no good being idle; for idleness is the source of evil. But the devil is never idle! The counter man blew the smoke clearly out of his chest through his mouth and nose and gazed at it as it sailed towards the ceiling. A bluish white cloud formed above and around him, and I could see a grin crossing his face as if he had performed a miracle. He cleared his throat as if in preparation to announce the existence of peace, and felt the master of himself and the immediate world. Master and servant of himself, whose only security is a wall of smoke.

A waiter approached me and asked what I would have.

“Lemon. Bitter lemon.”

“Anything else?”

“No, no please. Just one lemon. My stomach is not big enough for anything else.”

Presently, Mr Komposita arrived and joined me. He looked healthy and strong, and one could not believe he was the same man I had met among sacks of charcoal some years back.

“Now what is this important information you don't want my husband to know?” I asked.

“I'm sorry Madam to bother you with these small things, but I thought I should leak the information to you in good time. You know we are friends. The warmth you put in my bed kept me for so many years!” He laughed. I smiled and said nothing. “OK. Let's be more serious. You remember a gentleman called Tom?”

My heart did a somersault, and I felt like running out of the room. Immediately, I saw him standing near me as I looked at dresses in a shop window. I saw him talking to me and his mouth exuding onion smell. I saw him grabbing me in a hotel room and robbing me of my pride, my virginity. He was the first man to know me and I hated him for that. An enemy who has been your friend knows your weakness. Those words spoken to me by my mother, stuck in my memory.

“What does he want?”

“He wants you.”

“Me? How?”

“He wants you to be his mistress.”

“I don't understand. It is very strange. He must be mad. I'm a married woman!”

“Well, he asked me to give you this letter.” He handed it to me.

“Are you his messenger then? Are you in this thing together, Mr Komposita?”

“Well, you know he is my boss, and I carry out his orders. I like my job and my life, too. Some people say that even the President fears him. Who am I not to obey his order?” He looked at me with eyes full of despair. I opened the envelope and read the letter.

Dear Flora,

B'n trying to get yee but no luck. I wanna you back to me. You are mine an yee know it. Come to my flat No. 23 Drill Road, Timber Hill at 10 a.m. Next Sunday. Don't make silly mistakes to refuse. As for consequences ask the bearer to explain.

Love, Tom.

I read the letter again, and every time I could see his mouth curl to one side with malice. The stitching on his chin always made him look like a murderer, a devil. I don't know why I ever let him into my life.

“What is this he wants you to explain to me?”

“He swears that if you refuse he will kill your husband and then marry you by force.”

“Oh, that is a joke,” I answered. But somehow I did not feel convinced of what I was saying.

“No, Madam, it is not a joke. I know my boss, and I'm sure you know him too.”

I looked at Mr Komposita and began to dislike him. How could he talk like that? He should support me or at least attempt to assure me that all was a joke. The strength of the probability that Tom might kill my husband took away my self-control and I found myself shouting at Mr Komposita.

“Get away from me! I thought you were my friend and now what is all this? I'll go to the police-now!”

“Take it easy, Madam, take it easy,” he said, looking around to see that nobody heard. “I am on your side, I want you to play your cards well in this matter. Don't rush. Going to the police is not a solution as the whole thing would come back to him. He is the boss, Madam, and the police are as good as useless. They just get their salaries and that's all. We do the duty, and we do everything. Now listen to me carefully. I'm your friend and God knows it. I think, if I may say it again, the warmth you put in my bed many years back has made us friends. Play your cards well, because this man Tom is very strong. If he means it he will do it. You know he has a grudge against your husband. I don't know why I'm always involved but the day I met you is the time. Tom had organised people to steal your husband's car. And you know what followed. Being locked up in prison for two years is not a joke. And you know it is your husband who put him in and now he wants to take revenge. You see, it is a personal grudge, and what can be worse than taking one's wife as revenge?”

I felt like vomiting. As the picture of revenge against my husband got clearer and clearer, my determination not to meet Tom hardened.

“I won't meet him. He is a rascal. How can he involve me in this dirty affair? He was found guilty of masterminding the network of thefts in the country, and he couldn't expect to get away with it. It just happened that my husband caught up with him. It could have been anybody else. The law is the law and if he wants to take revenge let him use the law to do so.”

“Madam, please understand. You are educated and you can see things more clearly than most of us. There is law and one can reason and argue the way you have done. But this is a question of revenge, and if he can use you in order to execute his revenge so much the better for him. But let's not waste time talking. Do one thing, go and see him and play your cards so as to save your husband. For I know if he means it he will do it. I have seen many similar things happen,” he said and stood up. “There is no law in this country. The gun is the law.”

“What can I do Mr Komposita?”

“Do what I suggest. In addition, he seems to love you. If you can save your husband, what's wrong with it? Make up your mind, and remember I'm on your side. There is another thing. If you find it intolerable and you decide to leave the country, I'm willing to help you and Hon Dota. It is a serious matter. Think about it. I am your friend,” he said and left me in the room.

What is all this? Tom in my life again? Why keep on following me wherever I go like a shadow? My God, what can I do to protect my husband, to save my marriage? A voice from my mother on the eve of my wedding day came to me clearly: “Don't let anyone throw mud in it.” I heard it clearly as if she was telling me right in my ear. My mind reviewed what had taken place on that memorable night. The whole picture of my people rejoicing and making merry because of my marriage came to my mind. I saw myself praying God to help me not let down all those people. Hadn't God received my prayers? Had he forsaken me? Why bring Tom into my life again?

I stood up and walked to my car which had been waiting outside the hotel. I could feel the eyes of the hotel dwellers hot on my back until I entered the car. I ordered the driver to drive home quickly. My son came running to meet me and when he embraced me, cementing my relationship with Steve, I broke into sobs. Friendship is like honey. It is sweet in the mouth but it can change its mind when it reaches the stomach.

**Chapter Ten**

We threw soil on top of Jenifer's coffin and filled the pit with more soil until a mound was formed.

“We came from soil and so to soil shall we return,” the man of God said it and we accepted. Jenifer, the smiling, beautiful Jenifer had returned to soil. She was no more. It is very difficult to describe the state in which the people were. If you have been to a funeral you know what I mean.

Jenifer's father had nothing to say. He had been overpowered by grief and could not say more than this: “God gave us Jenifer and he has taken her. However, we shall never know why she decided to die like that. Forgive her God for...” He stopped there and parental tears dropped on his suit. Someone held him tightly and led him away from the graveside into his house. He was trembling all over. The wailing of women was in the air, and everybody was wondering why Jenifer had decided to kill herself.

“She provided me with peace of mind during her short life,” said her mother. “I did not expect her to do such a thing. It must be the work of the devil. She was always a happy and strong girl.”

“I know. It was a shock to us all,” I said with a tremor in my voice.

“You were friends,” she stated.

“Yes.”

“And you don't know why she did it?”

“No. She only left me this message.” I gave her the message and she read it.

“Poor child! Nothing to live for. I don't understand. But God knows better for I thought I had given her all she wanted.” She sighed and then continued. “There are things which parents cannot give to their children. I don't know why I'm saying this. We can provide for the comfort of the flesh. As for peace of mind, it is something else. I wish she had surrendered herself to her Creator. I wish...” She stood up and shuffled to the inner room, leaving me and the others to guess what was on her mind. Someone in the room took up the story. “I wish she had tried to share her problems with her friends, her parents or her teachers. I wish she had paused to think about the pain her death would cause us,” Silence followed as if we were waiting for a reply from Jenifer. There was no answer but we kept on waiting.

“It is this weather,” someone broke the silence. “We have never seen such a drought. It is working on everybody's mind.”

We agreed in silence. Everybody knew that the drought was becoming too much, but it was not a good topic to talk about. People had no immediate reactions. No one would suggest what to do to alleviate the situation because it was beyond their powers. The rain would come whenever it was ready. Everybody was praying for it but not a drop came. Every Sunday churches were full with people all praying for a hand-sized rain cloud in the sky, but there was no change. And wherever the topic of drought was introduced, people became afraid of what to say. They feared that someone would argue that the drought could continue for days and days. They would not let their fears be known for fear of the unknown. Nevertheless, their looks were already betraying them. Their faces looked as if someone had, with expert knowledge, sucked out all the water of life leaving the skin to glue on to the bones. Old people looked much older with their skins like beans soaked in salt, and their eyes were becoming watery. Despair was seen in their eyes; so prominent that one could touch it. It was tangible. And so we sat there looking at one another, saying nothing. But all of us had witnessed the works of despair.

“I wish it was me who had died,” one old woman said. “At least I have seen many years, and what I have not eaten I don't think is worth eating. Why take such a young thing! This is the work of the devil.”

There followed a vague murmur accepting the words of the old woman and the murmur disappeared from the room like an echo in the plains. Devil or no devil, death seemed to be among us.

I had to leave for home when it was still early because travelling at night was not safe. Cases of highway robbery were very common, and people were warned against travelling at night. We left the place around 3 p.m. and I told the driver to step on it. And so he did. The speed helped us as air streamed into the car to cool it against the scorching heat. Although it was approaching evening, the sun was still sending us rods of red heat. It was shining brightly but one could sense darkness in everyone's heart. The countryside looked like a landscape painted brown. Signs of life were few except sickly trees with leafless branches. Once in a while we could see small, lean animals roaming the place apparently looking for green pastures but all in vain. The whole place looked pathetic! Before the military takeover, this area was productive and evergreen. One could not cover a kilometre without seeing food along the road being sold to travellers. People could be seen walking up and down this section of the road so drivers were always warned to drive with care. School children would be crossing the road, or herds of cattle would be grazing near the road. But on that day there was nothing like that: the whole stretch of road was deserted. What was wrong?

Suddenly, we came to a line of almost stationary traffic and the driver brought the Benz to a dead stop. The squealing of tyres made the drivers of vehicles in front of us look in our direction.

“What is happening?” I asked the driver.

“Could be an accident,” a little girl at the back with me suggested.

“That would be bad,” another passenger said.

“It could be a road-block” said the driver.

“That is better than an accident,” I said and asked the driver to go and find out from the vehicle in front of us.

“It is a road-block,” he said as he entered the car. “Some people broke into a bank and stole all the money.”

“What will they do with all that money?” the small girl asked innocently. Everybody laughed.

“What would you do with the money?” I asked her.

“Well, if Daddy gave me money I would buy ice cream. It is very hot these days.”

“Supposing Daddy gave you a lot of money, what would you do with it?” the driver asked her.

“I would buy a dictionary, and stamps to write to my pen pals.”

“Maybe they stole the money to buy ice cream with,” I observed.

“They should have asked their Daddy to give them the money instead of stealing,” she said seriously.

“The ice cream is not enough to quench this thirst. They wanted the money to remove the drought,” the other passenger stated with a different tone, and no doubt the small girl did not understand him.

“In that case, it seems they wanted the money to give to the rainmakers,” I said laughing.

Presently, two men carrying heavy guns approached the car and one of them ordered us to get out.

“Show us what you have on you. And I mean everything,” he barked.

Everyone revealed all that they carried including the smallest items. They searched every part of the car, and even tapped the tyres.

“Madam,” he said, “do you see that tent over there? Go there and you will be checked. Thorough checking.”

I did not understand. What thorough checking was he talking about?

“I said go there and be checked like other women. We are on duty and can't afford wasting time on so-called educated women.”

I kept quiet and stayed where I was.

“I'll slap you or even shoot you if you don't do what I say.”

“You are on duty and so is every one,” I said. “And you should know how to talk to people who pay taxes for your maintenance.”

The man's face creased with fury and he stepped forward, ready to slap me. I quickly feinted backwards, and at the same time, his friend shouted at him.

“Stop there!” he yelled. “You can't begin beating women as if you can't fight a man.”

“Yes, sir,” the man recoiled in a salute to his boss, apparently, and continued searching the car.

“Whose car is this?” the boss asked the driver, who replied that it belonged to me.

“Can I see the documents, Madam?”

I produced the logbook.

“This is Hon Dota's car?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Are you Mrs Dota?”

“Yes.”

He looked at the logbook, then at me and finally at his junior who had stopped searching the car.

“Do you realise that you were going to beat a Director's wife, you scum?” the boss roared.

“I was not aware, sir.”

“You don't expect everyone to carry an identity on his or her chest. You should respect people as they are.”

“Yes sir.”

There was a brief pause.

“The best you can do now is to direct this car out of the queue and see to it that it passes through the checkpoint without any delay.”

“Yes sir.”

“Sorry Madam, about this incident. I'll see to it that he gets his dues.”

“Thank you, Officer,” I said as we got back into the car “Your type is rare these days.”

As we passed by other vehicles, we saw all sorts of things happening. Some soldiers were beating up passengers. Other passengers were crouching on the ground directly under the scorching sun. And children were crying in the arms of their helpless mothers. The combination of hunger, thirst, and discomfort made them very pitiable. We passed by the tent and a line of women had been formed leading into it. They looked haggard and frightened.

“Something is wrong here,” I said unconsciously as if I was addressing myself.

“Yes,” said the driver. “It is what they do to them inside there. It is not good. Some of them are beaten there.”

“It is bad,” I said.

“This is nothing compared to what I saw a month ago. It was in the evening and some women were being raped in the open.”

“Oh dear,” the other passenger sighed.

“Yes. I can still hear that scream of anguish piercing in my head. And nobody bothered to help. The other soldiers were idling around grinning and jeering.”

Nobody said a word. But the word 'rape' sent thousands of shivers through my body. It reminded me of that fateful night many years back when I was raped in a car. For how long will men go on raping women? Can't the men be masters of themselves where sex is concerned? Definitely they can control themselves. Cattle can. Why can't men prove to be better than beasts? Beasts, yes. Beasts don't rape one another. Their urges and emotions are well controlled and channelled. Dogs tend to over-do it but the whole matter is shelved for the next occasion. Why didn't God make us like dogs? Why did God bother to create us in his image? God's image? Raping, mad, human race. Thieves, murderers, and liars. Yes, God's image? Greedy, malicious and jealous. Yes. Jealousy. What of all this intelligence the creator put on a platter for us to use? It were better beasts used it, for without it, they are more intelligent than the human race. Who has ever heard of a leopard murdering a leopard or rats committing genocide against other rats?

I arrived home before six o'clock, and found my husband at home. Peter, my son, ran to me with arms open for an embrace.

“Mammie, we learnt many things today.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. Drawing. Drawing trees, houses and a car.”

“That is good. Can I see them?”

“Yes Mammie. In my room. I drew our car. It is red.”

“Is it? Let me greet the visitors and we shall go to your room afterwards.”

Professor Ruhu and Mr Kungu were seated with their backs to the French windows, facing Steve. Beside him was another man I was to know as Mr Macai. William Wilberforce Macai.

“Mr William Wilberforce Macai is Prof Ruhu's friend,” Steve said. “He is a businessman.” I shook hands with them and, after a brief exchange of pleasantries, I left them and went to my room to change. On my dressing table I found an envelope addressed to me. I wondered where it could have come from.

“Please do as I told you without any delay. Komposita.”

There was no date, no time and nothing else. The brevity of the message expressed the gravity of the matter. I knew very well what it was about, but what I did not know was what to do. Should I tell Steve about it? I thought. I know he won't believe it. He will laugh at me and say it is a joke. A practical joke. He doesn't know the details about my past relationship with Tom and he can't bring himself to accept whatever I'll tell him. How shall I tell him the whole story? Who can help me to convince him that there is danger hovering around? Professor Ruhu? No. Who then? Komposita? No. Komposita is out. Although he is in a good position to know where danger may come from, Steve still regards him as an uninformed, ignorant human-machine. He has no regard for uneducated employees of the government, especially those working in the Intelligence Section. So, who can help me now?

I called Dina, my maid, and asked her how the note had got to my room.

“A certain man called Komposita brought it,” she said.

“What does he look like?”

“Tall and very black.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“He said that you know how to contact him. He works in the government.”

“Which car was he driving?”

“A small bus.”

“A small bus? You mean a Kombi?”

“Yes, but it is slightly bigger, with ugly eyes,” she laughed. “Peter did not like the bus.”

“What happened?”

“When he saw it, he ran away and hid himself.” She laughed again.

“OK. Thank you.”

I joined the men in the sitting room downstairs. Professor Ruhu and Mr Macai were drinking beer and, to my surprise, Steve was drinking whisky. I sensed that something was wrong. For whenever something disturbed him he resorted to whisky. Moreover, he had recently stopped drinking.

“I don't know how women will react to the budget release,” Prof Ruhu stated as he looked at me.

“Which budget?” I asked.

“Today's budget. You mean you don't know?”

“Well, I haven't had the chance. I'm just from upcountry. What is in it?”

“Everything is up by at least fifty percent. And that is the least increase. Some of the items are increased a hundred per cent,” Prof Ruhu said.

“Local fabrics were not affected very much, though,” added Mr Macai. “But the imported garments as well as unfinished textiles will be taxed over fifty per cent.”

“This is quite a lot, as there aren't many local textiles,” I put in.

“My feeling is that they should develop and expand the local production before bothering to limit any imports. Apparently there isn't any local production at all, and I don't see what local market the government wants to protect,” Mr Kungu said. “I think the solution to the problem is not economic. The whole answer is spiritual maturity. There is no leadership. The whole thing is purposeless.”

“You tell the President,” Steve said cynically.

“Of course, I am not attacking any individual leader Mr Director, and I wouldn't like to abuse the liberty of airing my simple views in your house.”

“What has spiritual maturity got to do with the budget?” Mr Macai asked, and helped himself to another beer.

“I wouldn't like to annoy anybody. But then this is what I feel. I feel that we Africans have failed to attain spiritual maturity, a readiness to lead ourselves; a purposeful and dedicated sense of direction towards an achievement of happiness for mankind.” We kept quiet. “I do believe that we got this so-called political independence when we were not ready. As such, we have expended all our energies on useless things,” Mr Kungu continued, with a preacher's eloquence. Nobody said a word.

“We can't manage,” he said. “The colonial days were better, far better. At least there was justice.”

There was silence into the house.

I handed more beers to the visitors and Steve kept drinking whisky. My fear was that he would get drunk before the others did. We continued to drink in silence as if the words said by Mr Kungu were cutting their way right into our bloodstream - a process which seemed to need silence. I could 'see' hundreds of beggars roaming the towns and others lying helplessly in front of shops. Some of them were genuine beggars without homes or any relations, only hoping to live off the sympathy and charity of a few individuals. Others were simply poor people who had resorted to begging because society couldn't get them any means of earning a living. Others were young boys and girls who had been thrown into the harsh teeth of life by the country's social changes. They were the scum of cultural and moral disintegration. Couldn't these people be helped by our society? Yes, maybe Mr Kungu is right. We tend to run after money and forget to help the needy members of our society. The money is in a few hands and the majority hear of it just as a story. I 'saw' the countryside scorched by the drought and units of human beings dragging themselves under the heat of the day. I 'saw' sellers of little articles at the bus park running up and down panting for cooler air. I 'saw' school children, small and big, already with creased faces because of thirst. Once in a while they would search the open sky to detect any sign of a rain cloud. I could 'see' the adults, both poor and rich, their mouths cracked and skin peeling off because of drought. All of them wanted a change except a few who were not affected. Everything was being mismanaged.

“Budget or no budget there is no difference,” I broke the silence. Steve looked at me with red eyes and swallowed more whisky. “If only people could get food. If only we could get rain,” I added hurriedly.

“I guess we could have an overhead irrigation system all over the country,” Steve said sarcastically.

“That may not be very necessary, Mr Director,” said Prof Ruhu. “People are the most wonderful creation God ever attempted. They are capable of enduring different forms of difficulty with varying degrees of intensity. But then, they are basically animals. They need love, tendering and leadership. They need a sense of hope to be instilled in them. Causing rain is probably beyond our imagination, but we can't say it is impossible to keep the hopes of our people high up to the day the change will come. I do believe that our people are capable of adjusting themselves to the crudest way of living. But while they are doing so let their morale be kept high in preparation for any good change.”

“What do you suggest? Preach to them on radio and TV that you should have hope, or threaten death to all rain-makers if it doesn't rain in a day or two?” Steve asked, yawning.

“I don't know, Mr Director,” Ruhu said. “But we feel that the leadership should be more sympathetic and committed to providing security to the people. This includes everything that contributes to the general happiness of our people.”

“This reminds me, Mr Director,” said Mr. Macai. “I have to go home early as driving at night is full of risks. There is always a robbery or two with violence in the city daily.”

“We can't manage,” Mr Kungu interjected, shaking his head. “We Africans will never rule ourselves. The other day we took a thief to a certain police station only to find that the only policeman on duty was sound asleep. When he woke up after we shook him vigorously, he almost made us drunk with his breath.” We all laughed.

They said thank you to us for our hospitality and we bade one another good-night.

“You look tired, darling,” I said.

“Well, I think I'm sick. Well, perhaps drunk. I started drinking some hours ago.”

“I was surprised to see you drinking. You had promised not to drink again.”

“There is nothing else you can do these days. That's the only way to keep sane. How was the journey?”

“Tiring. The funeral was as I thought. A lot of crying and grief. The father almost fainted in the middle of the graveside speech. It was heartbreaking.”

“Well, I think there is something wrong in the air. I feel tired and all my strength is sapped. I could do with a good long holiday abroad,” he sighed.

“That would be nice!” I leapt at the idea.

“But it is impossible. No Director is to leave the country. In any case, I need a holiday. I need a break from this office routine.”

“You could arrange to have an upcountry tour. It would do you good,” I put in.

“I don't know, I do not know whether it is fair. I think I should keep on going to the office. I don't think I deserve the holiday any more than the poor farmer upcountry.” He sighed, again.

“What is all this talk about leadership, darling?” I asked.

“They think the leadership is illiterate. They think it is not effective.”

I kept quiet. I knew Prof Ruhu's views about the African governments. He had always said that ninety per cent of leaders in Africa were blind. That they did not know what they wanted in life as persons, and it was worse as leaders. He had always said in public lectures, despite the ears of the government, that some leaders were only fit to be night watchmen. Further, he had always said that the educated population in African countries had let down the masses by not supplying challenging leadership. Quite often he had stopped in the middle of lectures to wipe tears from his eyes when discussing the reluctance and inability of the educated people to accept their position of leadership.

“What do they want from you?”

“To lead. To provide leadership. They think that our country needs educated young people to lead.”

“What did you tell them?”

“Nothing.”

“Do you agree with them?”

“I don't know. It is difficult to tell these days. Very difficult, dear.”

“Mr Kungu does not seem to have confidence in his fellow Africans. Do you know why?”

“Yes. It is the kind of job he has been doing. What do you expect from a hotel manager of a tourist resort? He has always served the whites and only very few Africans. The idea of Africans being masters does not go deep into his head.” He fell silent and then added, “I think I should go to bed; I feel tired.”

“You'd better dear. You look tired.”

“Is Peter OK?”

“Yes. He should be in bed now.”

“He looked scared when I drove in. Something must have scared him.” he said.

“He looks all right.” Silence followed.

“Darling,” I said, “if Mr Kungu does not believe in African leadership why does he want you to provide leadership?”

“I don't know, and I don't think they are serious. Prof Ruhu looks serious though. And so does Mr. Macai.”

“What do they want?”

“They want a change of government. They want a change.”

“And they want you to do it?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“To agree. To agree with them.”

“And then?”

“And then I don't know. I guess they want support. Yes, support. Moral support, you know.”

“Moral support. Do you have it? I mean, what are you going to do?”

“To sleep. I'm going to bed.”

“But they will come back.”

“Yes.”

“And what will you do?”

“I'll go to bed.”

“I see.” Silence “Darling.”

“Yes,” he said.

“You realise that you are the only Director in the government who is educated?”

“Meaning?”

“I mean through formal education.”

“It's not my fault.”

“Of course not, darling.”

“I know.”

“Maybe that's why they want your support.”

“Maybe.”

“Why don't you agree?”

“Agree?”

“I mean, you see, well... Maybe it is all right with us. We have almost everything. But other people are suffering. No income, nothing. No services being rendered to them. They have been left on their own, abandoned by the government. Not only that. Even harassed and killed by their own government.”

“Careful. Careful, darling. This is a government house and you never know who is listening.”

“It is a shame that people should go on suffering like this and we keep on hiding our feelings.”

“Careful, darling!”

“I saw the whole picture of suffering today at the funeral. Everybody looks dry. No hope. Nothing!”

“I know. It is bad.” Silence. “ I had an unusual dream this morning when you left me in bed,” he said as he opened a fresh bottle of whisky.

“You are drinking too much, darling.”

“It is this dream which is on my mind. You see, I was with the President in a room and I can't remember where that room was. It was full of mosquitoes. They went on buzzing and singing everywhere and tried to enter our ears. The boss was so annoyed that he began killing them with his hands - bashing them against the wall, furniture and every surface. He got excited and exhilarated as moments went by. He stood on a chair, a shoe in hand, and began killing a swarm of them which had taken refuge on the ceiling. He continued batting them furiously towards the centre of the ceiling above the electric lamp. Still standing on a chair he chased, with one arm, the very fat one which had stung him most. In an attempt to avoid toppling to the floor, he clung to a wooden window sill which unfortunately, gave way before his ruthless pull. He flew off the chair, arms wide apart, and fell on top of a dining table bringing down with him the lamp, lamp shade and part of a curtain, all in tatters. His hands were covered with blood.”

“Oh dear, that was terrible. What did you do?”

“That is the point. Usually one doesn't react logically in a dream. But you see, I ran away from the mess. And as I was running away I saw you in the market walking with Peter. I wanted to talk to you but every time I attempted to call you, the voice would not come. The market was full of people and many kinds of food. I saw you buying tinned food and fresh vegetables, and Peter had biscuits in his hands. As I approached you, you went further away from me. I saw you two walk out of the market and then, suddenly, a man grabbed you and put you in a box. Nobody bothered to help you. Peter cried and began beating the man and tore off his clothes. The man, in turn, struck Peter and chased him until he caught him. I saw the man carrying him towards a hole without a bottom. I ran hard and shouted at him. I shouted again and then I woke up.”

“That was a frightening dream,” I said.

“Yes.”

“You don't believe in dreams, do you darling?”

“I am a Christian.”

“That's OK. At least nobody died.”

“I didn't like the fright it gave me.”

“And then, a few hours later, these people came to ask you to provide leadership as the boss is stretched on the dining table for the mosquitoes to feast on?”

“I think I should go and sleep,” he said, walking towards the bedroom.

This is a strange dream, I pondered. I hope the man who put me in the box is not Tom. I hope it is only a dream. But some dreams have meanings. Dreams or no dreams it does not matter. God is with us. We are Christians. Yes, we are Christians. If we were not we would have gone to a witch doctor. This is nothing. But mother believes in witchcraft and yet she is a Christian! No, it can't be as bad as that. Nobody is bewitching us. Not Betwa as mother would have probably suggested. Should I tell Steve now about Tom? The whole affair would be discussed now and once for all. He would at least know what is going on. No, it would scare him. He would think the dream is meaningful and he would lose courage. Courage. Yes. I must encourage him to provide leadership. He must lead a new government. He is the only one to take over. Yes, I must encourage him. It is my duty as his wife. And when he takes over, this threat by Tom will be submerged forever. Tom will go. Go for ever. And I will be free!

I reached for the telephone and dialed Jane's number, only p

kto be told that she and her husband had gone out. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to tell her about some of my worries. I knew she had her own and we would reduce them by talking them over. Most of all I wanted to seek advice as to what I could do about Tom. She had known Tom right from the beginning of our relationship and maybe she could help me better than anybody else. But then she was not in. I looked up Komposita's house telephone number and, with hesitation, I dialed the number.

“Who is speaking?” a rough voice crackled on the other end.

“Can I speak to Mr Komposita, please?” I said gently.

“Who is speaking?”

“Let me talk to him. It is urgent.”

“Speaking,” he said.

“I saw the note you left at my place. Thanks.”

“Oh, it is you, Madam? Good. Now, don't waste time. Do it now.” He hung up.

A voice rang close to my ear - 'don't let anyone throw mud in it' - and I jerked myself into an upright position. Could it be so bad? I walked quickly to the bedroom with the intention of telling Steve about the whole affair but he was already asleep. I looked at his face, now rough with creases from worry. His hair was thinning fast despite the quantity of the best hair tonic in the country he was using. Could this be the face I saw about five years back? The past began to reopen itself to me. I saw myself dancing with him at our wedding dance. The first dance in our lives as wife and husband. We danced slowly and gently without a word from either of us. We were strangers, as it were. Strangers who had been thrown into each other's arms by the sweetness of music, some music; some rhythm; love.

He was in a dark suit. His very white shirt made it look darker still. The shirt collar was rather stiff, so stiff that he could not turn his head either way. His neck looked as if it was in plaster. Tall, about five eleven, he towered over my height of about five four although my platform shoes made me look slightly taller. I'm sure I looked dignified in a sack-like evening dress; earrings dangled as we turned with the rhythm of music. We kept away from each other as it was the rule of dignity. The only contact was hands and shoulders. But we kept on dancing the same rhythm. However, moments later, he held me tight and then tighter. He brought me closer and closer to him and his masculine warmth cheered my overcool anxious femininity. He looked straight into my face and said: I love you, Flo.

I remembered the third day of our honeymoon. We went to see a film which came back vividly to my mind. It was “Dr Zhivago”. I had seen the film a couple of years back, but I was most glad to see it again with my husband. It showed many aspects of life of a man in a changing world. But above all, it showed how love is meaningful where it is possible. My love for Steve was meaningful and I knew it and I had to keep it. I looked at him again and there he was: my husband in a changing world. But my love for him never changed.

“Mammie!” Peter called as he knocked on the door to our bedroom.

“Peter, what is it?”

“Mammie! Come and see my book,” he said, almost singing.

“Oh yes, dear. I am coming.” I went to his room.

“Why didn't you come Mammie?”

“I had visitors, dear. Oh! Those are good drawings!”

“Thank you Mammie.”

“What did your teacher say?”

“He says it is good.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Yes. You can see my stomach,” he said as he pulled up his shirt to show the stomach. “And you Mammie?”

“I am OK. What do you want me to cook for you tomorrow, dear?”

“I don't want meat, Mammie. I want Grandma's food. Take me there, Mammie. Tomorrow.”

“I'll see. You sleep and I'll tell you tomorrow.”

“You promise me?”

“Well sleep, dear. It's getting late. You are a big boy now. The teacher won't be happy if you begin to sleep in class.”

“OK. Mum. If I sleep we can go to see grandma?”

“Yes.”

“Yes! Let's go tomorrow Mum. I'll see cows and sheep, and my dog. We shall bring doggie, Mum?”

“Yes.”

“And it will sleep in this room. Here, under my bed.”

“OK. Sleep, dear. Don't make a lot of noise. You'll disturb Dad.”

“Is Dad sleeping?”

“Yes. Don't disturb him.”

“I want to see Dad, Mum.”

“Not now Peter. Sleep. You'll see him tomorrow. He is now asleep.”

“I want to kiss him good-night, Mum.”

“I'll do it for you.”

“Oh Mum!”

“Com'on. Don't waste time. Get into the bed now. Go on!”

“OK. OK. Mum.”

“Good night, darling.”

“Good night, Mammie.”

I went back to our bedroom but before I closed the door, I heard Peter calling me.

“What is it, Peter? I told you to sleep.” I was losing my temper. “Sleep now, do you hear?”

“Mammie. Stay here. Stay with me.” He looked at me innocently.

I began to get worried. What was eating him up? What was worrying him? He had never behaved like that before. He always went to bed early and he quite often fell asleep the moment a blanket was spread over him. He kept on staring at me steadily in spite of the signs of temper on my face. Suddenly, I realised that Peter who always went to bed early was up, and Steve who always went to bed late was already in bed, snoring. Had the father and son exchanged patterns of behaviour and habits? Or perhaps the sudden change in the father was being projected further in the son. Or perhaps it was nothing. Nothing at all.

“Why don't you sleep dear?” I softened my attitude and I saw a ray of mirth dance in his eyes.

“Mammie, I want to tell you my poem!” he said with almost overflowing enthusiasm.

“A poem?” I heard myself utter with surprise. Children are full of surprises. How could he think of that far-off idea at bedtime? And yet it was most appropriate. I should have been the one to suggest telling a story or reading him a poem to lull him to sleep. And there he was asking me to listen to his poem! Children are a masterpiece of God's creation.

“Yes. We learnt it today. I forgot to tell you. And tomorrow we shall say it again in class.”

“Oh really? Then let's hear it darling. Let's hear it dear.”

“OK Mum. But Mum, will you tell me a story also?”

“Well, are you bargaining?”

“What is bargaining, Mum?”

“It is a difficult word, dear.”

“Is it Mum?”

“Yes. Now tell me your poem. You ought to be in bed by now.”

“Why can't you sleep with me Mum?”

“Do you fear sleeping here alone?”

“No.”

“Then why do you want me to stay?”

“Because you are my Mammie!” He smiled.

“OK. Let's hear the poem dear.”

I walk on my toe  
I walk on my toe  
Where I am going to  
Nobody knows  
The whole of the day  
The whole of the day  
I walk on my toe!

“Marvellous, marvellous dear! This is a very good poem. Thank you darling. Can you say it again?”

He repeated the poem half singing, half laughing, and then I joined him in reciting it. Peter, like most children, is an actor by nature and is always ready to dramatise every possible situation. So, I saw him already in the act. He was moving about the room walking on his toes at the same time as he recited the poem.

“Move with me, Mum. Walk on the toe the whole of the day.”

“You walk first and I will join you later dear.”

“Walk with me Mum,” he implored.

“I have shoes on, darling,” I said lamely.

“Take them off Mum. Join me. Join our class. Mum. Walk on the toe. The whole of the day. Common Mum. Let's walk on the toe.”

“You are still young, dear. Your bones are strong. Mine will break if I walk on them.”

“You can't Mum? Walk slowly like me. Just here Mum. Not the whole of the day.” After persistent requests I joined him in his play and we walked on our toes about the room, singing the poem and laughing together.

“Mammie, why doesn't Aunt Dina wear shoes?” he asked when we sat down to rest.

“She doesn't have them, I suppose.”

“Why can't she buy them?”

“She has no money.”

“Why can't she get money, Mum?”

“Because it is difficult to get money.”

“So she walks on her toe?”

“Yes. Unfortunately she does, dear.”

“Can you walk on your toes, Mum?”

“Yes. You saw me.”

“Like Aunt Dina?”

“You saw me just now, darling.”

“Why don't you give her your shoes?”

“My shoes, did you say, dear?”

“I'll give her mine.”

“Why don't you sleep, dear. Sleep now otherwise you'll be late for school tomorrow.”

“OK Mum.”

“Thanks for the poem dear. It is very wonderful. I'll tell you my story tomorrow.”

“Good night Mum.”

“Good night darling.”

**Chapter Eleven**

The church was full to capacity. It was an occasion to offer special prayers to God so that the country could get rain. It was hot inside, and as there were no fans to reduce the heat, most of the people were ready with handkerchiefs to wipe the sweat off their faces. I felt sticky and disgusted. I twice thought of going out for fresh air, but then Steve's presence seemed to pin me to my seat. He was the only Director in the church and people took it for granted that he represented the President. As a matter of fact, he did not.

The service took almost the normal procedure: singing the hymns while standing and kneeling down for prayers, sitting down for listening to lessons and the sermon. We went through all this while looking forward to the moment we would be released from that hot building, and hoping that God had listened to our prayers and that, most important, he was going to be practical. But it was the sermon which held our attention. Archbishop Mboki, with a filmy look, gazed at us for a long moment and then opened the Bible. He is a tall man with strong muscles that fit well on his frame. But that day it seemed he had borrowed the surplice from a bigger man. He kept on adjusting his spectacles as if his face had shrunk considerably. But when he opened his mouth to speak, his voice was still Archbishop Mboki's voice. Deep and firm.

“Brothers in Christ, the words I am going to speak are not my own. If I were to speak my own words I would not know how to do it. God uses me today to deliver His message to you, the message which is in His Holy Book. And I ask you to find the Lamentations of Jeremiah, Chapter One, Verse One. I read:

How lonely sits the city  
that was full of people.  
How like a widow has she become;  
She that was a princess among the cities  
has became a vassal.

He held us in suspense for some agonising moments, and then said:

“Let's turn to the Book of Amos, Chapter Four, Verses 6 to 13.” He continued.

I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,  
and lack of bread in all your places,  
yet you did not return to me!

Says the Lord.

And also withheld the rain from you,  
when there were yet three months to the harvest;  
I would send no rain upon one city,  
and send no rain upon another city;  
yet you did not return to me!

Says the Lord.

I sent among you a pestilence after the  
manner of Egypt;  
I slew your young men with the sword;  
I carried away your horses;  
and made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils;  
yet you did not return to me,

Says the Lord.

I overthrew some of you,  
as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,  
and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning;  
yet you did not return to me,

Says the Lord.

Therefore thus I will do to you, O  
Israel;  
because I will do this to you,  
prepare to meet your God, O Israel!

For, he who forms the mountains, and  
creates me wind,  
and declares to man what is his thought;  
Who makes the morning darkness,  
and treads on the heights of the earth-  
the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name!

He held us in suspense for another long two moments and then asked us to turn to the letter of James, Chapter 5, Verses 7 to 12.

Be patient, therefore, brethren until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth being pertinent over it until it receives the early and the later rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation.

He closed the Book and went straight to his seat, and knelt down. As if by telepathy, we fell to our knees and within no time, the church was full of sobbing. Some people were heard crying aloud. The congregation stayed on their knees despite the clear instructions from the clergyman to stand up and sing the final hymn for the collection. We sang the hymn while on our knees and the offers were collected as we knelt and the Bishop blessed us, still on our knees. I felt like staying in the kneeling position, and so did the others, I think. I no longer felt the heat. The only thing I felt was a sort of absorbing coolness; mental coolness and physical weightlessness: the feeling you get when you sit in a swing and some mighty hand swings you. Then I pulled myself up into a sitting position. People were beginning to leave the church and I followed them. Steve was beside me and we walked out of the church together. Archbishop Mboki was standing just outside the church, saying a word or two to members of the congregation as they left the church. His face was grim and true, he had lost weight. Perhaps he was fasting or maybe the Government budget had affected his shopping list. Whatever the case, he looked haggard. But when he saw us - Steve and me - a smile lit up his face and his eyes glittered with joy.

“Aoa! Mr Director. We are honoured to have you with us today.” They shook hands.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“We thank God for that,” he said and shifted his eyes to me. The Archbishop was present at our wedding and he had been to our home quite often. And so he knew us quite well. He always called me by my first name; it was not different that Sunday.

“Aaa! We are blessed with the presence of our dear Flora. How are you my dear? And how is the little one?”

“Very well thank you, Your Grace.” I felt several eyes hot on me. “How is the family?”

“Very well, very well. God the merciful is keeping us strong. The Lord is abundantly kind.”

“Yes, He is, Your Grace,” I said.

“When you get time, Your Grace, come and visit us,” Steve said, showing signs of wanting to leave.

“God will enable us to meet again.”

We marched off to our car and left for home. “You can't communicate with God and stay alive at the same time. He looks dead,” Steve commented.

“He is not the only one who looks emaciated. Most of the people look like shadows.” Silence. “I didn't like the sobbing,” I stated.

“But you were sobbing too.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don't know.”

“I have never seen such a thing. Very pathetic,” he said and held my arm.

“I didn't like the message.”

“Which message?” he asked casually.

“The sermon.”

“Oh yes. The sermon.”

“We have been patient enough. People want rain. People want a change.”

“People.”

“Yes, dear.”

“Which people?”

“People! The masses. Everybody.” Silence.

“How do we know that people want a change?” His eyes shone with a far-away look.

“By looking at them. They are suffering.”

“Suffering alone does not necessitate change. Change may cause more suffering.”

“Depends on who suffers.”

“Yes.”

“Honestly we need rain now.”

“Yes. But the rains which come after a drought like this cause a lot of damage; floods, landslides etc. We should bear all this in mind. We should prepare for it.” I nodded. “I think we need patience. The sermon was most appropriate,” he said and looked at me squarely. The temptation to tell him about Tom overwhelmed me. 'Tom will not wait. He is all out to destroy us. Steve should team up with others like Prof Ruhu, Mr Macai and Mr Kungu, to mention a few, and form a new government. That is the only thing to ensure that Tom is destroyed forever. Any delay will give our enemies further chances for taking advantage of the drought.'

“Do you know what happened to Mr Kungu?”

“No. What happened?” I asked.

“He is dead.”

“No!” Just as I thought of him!

“He was found with documents associated with a foreign plan to overthrow the government. He was shot dead on the spot.”

“But they can't shoot him like that without trial, can they?”

“They did.”

“Poor Kungu. And he had just lost a brother!” I almost cried.

“Yes. He had just lost a brother.”

“This shooting without trials is unjust.”

“It is treason to plan to do such a thing, and he would have been shot, anyway.”

“He should have been tried first,” I asserted.

“He is dead.”

“Does the President know about it?”

“The President has no time for the dead.”

Silence.

The first news item that evening was about a foreign plan to overthrow the government which had been unearthed by the National Intelligence Squad. Ten people had been caught and they were being interrogated, and they would face a fair trial later in the week. The government was happy and proud of the initiative taken by the NIS (nothing was mentioned about the death of Mr Kungu). The government was determined to use its strength to stamp out any culprits of that nature, and everybody was asked to cooperate in ensuring and defending the sovereignty of the motherland.

One day Steve, Peter and I sat quietly in the lounge next to our bedroom. It was another Sunday. Steve sat opposite me, while Peter busied himself with his drawings.

“Dad, does Mammie love you as she loves me? Mammie loves me; Dad! Mammie is good.” He looked into his father's face to see the effect of his words. His father's face began to widen as if some mysterious hands were pulling a sheet of smile across it. His face looked like a smiling mask. No more. Suddenly, the smile disappeared as a dull sun would behind a duller cloud.

Steve was in a basket chair reading a magazine. He looked at the words like a cat looking at its own image in a window glass: ignorant and timid. Nay, rather frightened. He flapped the pages of the magazine, looked at the front cover picture and then yawned. A housefly landed on his nose and explored the geography of his face unperturbed until it decided to fly away. He stretched his long legs and smiled again. Muscles on his cheekbones bulged, assuming the appearance of two breasts of a young girl who has not seen the moon yet. He put the magazine on top of a heap of fellow *TIME* magazines on a nearby stool, and then he looked up at the ceiling. He swallowed some saliva and the Adam's apple went up and down. The smile reappeared and remained glued to his face.

“So Tom is following you,” he broke the silence.

I nodded.

“Have you seen or heard from him of late?”

“No,” I lied. And that's the part of the story I would not like him to know. I don't know why. But I think I did not want anybody else to know, even my husband. It would have angered him and he could have made a fatal mistake in the attempt to punish Tom.

The truth is I had seen Tom three days before. I had come from a lecture room carrying books in my hands and had gone straight to my car. The driver was in his seat ready to drive and I was looking forward to a good lunch with Jane and her husband.

“Sorry I kept you waiting,” I said to the driver.

“It's all right,” he replied and put the car into motion, But something was funny about my driver that day. He had sunglasses on, a wide brimmed hat, and a heavy overcoat. I could not understand. They looked very expensive items. Maybe he had borrowed them or maybe he had bought them! I felt like teasing him.

“You look different today, John.”

“Not quite, Madam,” he said after moments of hesitation. That kind of hesitation you entertain when you are not sure it is your name which was called.

“You have even changed your voice!”

“I am not John, Madam. John is behind you.”

Unconsciously, I looked behind hoping to laugh about his newly acquired courage to tease his employer. But what I saw made my heart miss a beat. That black eye of a gun was staring at me. Behind it was a huge body of a man with a face like a baboon or only slightly better.

“We are given the luxury of shooting you if you cause any slight inconvenience. So, sit up in your seat and keep your eyes in front of you. Any slight movement on your part will definitely inconvenience us. You see what I mean?” He spoke like an unoiled machine.

“Who are you?”

“Shut up!” he barked.

“Where have you put John?”

He slapped me on my left ear from behind.

“You will regret this,” I said calmly, to my surprise. But this did not stop him from giving me another slap, which silenced me. Soon I knew where I was being taken. We climbed up Timber Hill, famous for its beautiful trees and gardens. But now skeletons of trees and threads of shrubs covered the area. One match could send the whole hill into flames.

Tom was waiting for me, apparently, and next to him sat Kit.

“Welcome back, dear darling,” said Tom as he gave me his hand to shake. I refused. “Sit anywhere. This is yar house.” I kept quiet and refused to sit.

“Of course yee know Kit, don't yee dear? Am sure yee know each other. In case yee have forgotten each other 'cos of the new roles yee are now playing I'll introduce yee. Flora Tom alias Mrs Dota, His Excellency Kit our Ambassador in the Middle East. And I - Mr Tom, the second in command!” Then they laughed uproariously.

“Glad to meet you Flora,” said Kit and he attempted to shake my hand. I refused to offer it to him. Then I saw Tom coming to me with anger written on his face like a buffalo charging at an intruder.

“Yee can't keep standing there like a stupid statue. Come down and join us. Otherwise I'll beat yee up. Nobody in this country behaves like that in front of me except the boss. Even the boss has a good mind not to behave like that. Come! Stupid woman.” He slapped me on both sides of the face almost at the same time and I began to see stars dancing in front of my eyes. He pulled me down to one of the seats and forced me to drink some whisky. He switched on music too loud for the room to contain, and at the same time did something to the chair I was in - for it started to swing me sideways. I was drunk. I lost my bearings. Later, I found myself in a different place.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“With me. Darling. Yar with me.” Tom grinned at me. Yes it was true. I was with Tom in bed. His bed. He had seen my nakedness again. I cried. How could the world be so unfair? Why do all this to me?

“Don't cry darling. Yee are meant to be mine. I love yee and yee know it. It's only Mr Dota took ye from me.” He continued saying such drivel to me and forcing himself on me. I felt helpless and hopeless. I wished I were dead.

“Why don't yee like a man like me?”

“I hate you! I hate you!”

I broke down and cried but there was no help.

“Yee don't hate me. Yee love me. Flora ye love me. Remember those good days when we were both poor but in love? Things were good. Yee were sweet to me, and then another man took yee. And now we both are rich why not love each other again? Why Flora? Why?”

“I hate you. I hate you and I'll never love you. I know and love one man and that is my husband!” I cried.

“Take it easy, darling. Hold me closer and kiss me. Like that, like that!” He forced me to kiss him, and then kicked the bedding away leaving us naked in an embrace. At the same time a flash and another and another crossed us. Then I knew what was going on.

“That's enough Kit. That's enough. Let's wait for five minutes and see this wonderful exhibit.” He then turned to me. “Yee can dress, Mrs. Dota. These photos will show how much faithful yee are to yar beloved husband. If anything, they are gonna create the biggest scandal in the history of Cabinet Directors and their unfaithful wives.”

My God, I could not believe it. Five minutes later, clear photographs came out and there I was, naked, embracing Tom in his bed.

“Either yee become my mistress, a regular mistress, or I'll show this to the police,” he said dryly. “This can cost your husband a job and can earn yee a divorce. So be sensible little girl.”

How I hated him!

“He says if you don't become his mistress he will kill me?” Steve asked, toying with his thumbs.

“Yes. And he sent this message to me through Komposita.”

“Is Komposita on his side or our side?”

“Our side. At least he said so.”

“What are you going to do?” He asked the question I was going to ask him.

“We clear him!”

“How?”

“By you taking over the government.”

He looked at me and then at Peter, who was in the meantime absorbed in his work. Our presence seemed not to matter at all.

“That's a very good car, son. The bus is rather too crooked at the front, though. What is this?”

“This? This is Mammie's car. This is yours. The bus is not crooked. That is what buses look like. I know it Dad.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and they are big, too.”

“Yes, yes they are, son.”

“Yesterday we saw one like this. Me and Mammie.”

“Yes you did.”

“Big and ugly. It went like this.” Peter began to demonstrate on his knees down on the carpet. “Voooo! Vooooo!” He made a noise resembling the kind of bus he had in mind. He moved all around amongst the furniture and his father followed him with his eyes. The interest of the father in the son seemed to intensify as the boy made acrobatic movements to avoid some delicate articles in the room. I watched; and his father kept on watching from a distance. A distance of place and time. I felt admiration for our son flowing into my heart and then it rushed into my head almost making me dizzy. What a lucky human being! An embodiment of freedom. No strain, no worries, nothing! What a good thing to be young! In a split second the father was on his knees doing exactly what the son was doing - behaving like a bus. “Vooooo! Voooo!” Soon the room was full of voooooooing noise. The father and son became more like buses than anything else.

Now and then he would meet Peter almost headlong and then one of them would make a noise to the tune of a car horn- Nwhaa! Nwhaaa! At one time they collided. The son laughed and the father did the same. They both remained buried in spasms of laughter for some time, and then resumed their bushood. They collided the second time but this time they did not laugh. Instead, they pushed each other using their heads as bulls would. Soon they began to play at fighting bulls. The father let his son push him farther back as if to give his son the full satisfaction of success. The boy's voice shifted from the vooing noise to shrieks of merriment. As the father kept on retreating, the son's voice shot higher and higher.

It seemed that the father had an insatiable desire to please the son by keeping on retreating and the son, almost equally, had an insatiable desire to please the father by pushing him farther back. This seemingly mutual interest to please each other prolonged the game indefinitely. The father dodged pieces of furniture with his bottom and would steer himself with his trousered knees and bare feet. Before long, the carpet was folded up in many places. As he avoided going into a chair, he made a sharp deviation. Unfortunately, he upset a stool on which there was a clay vase full of flowers. Flowers, water, and pieces of broken clay splashed on the fighting bulls.

Steve and Peter jerked and shook almost in unison. They looked at each other and then at the broken flower-vase as if they had been ordered to do so. With some disbelief, they seemed to wriggle out of the characters of bulls and saw themselves as human beings, human awareness dazzling their eyes.

Steve raised his top half into a kneeling position and got a good view of what had happened. It was a sorry mess of once-upon-a-time beautiful things that were no longer so. He stared at the flowers which were almost drowning in a pool of water. Pieces of broken clay which once made a complete vase were scattered far apart. He shifted his eyes from the floor to a beautiful clock on the wall. It hung there as it had for many years. No change. It went on unperturbed. Indifferent and impersonal. He turned his face suddenly from the clock and his eyes darted from corner to corner as if looking for consolation in other beautiful things. At last, his eyes rested on Peter. Yes, his son. His son was there in a cross-legged sitting position, with his eyes fixed on me.

There was a kind of fear and bewilderment on Peter's face. I was puzzled. How could a mere toppling of a vase of flowers, however beautiful, affect a young boy so much? The beautiful vase and the calm, innocent flowers had just been destroyed because of an accident. The accident had been caused by a bull-fight which was meant to provide happiness to father and son. Very bad. Why should good motives cause pain, destruction or even extinction to other things? Why? Good motives, happiness, love, good this, good the other. What are these things for if they can also cause harm?

“Hello darling!” Steve said. I smiled. “Sorry the vase is broken. I know what it meant to you. Well, we shall get a replacement.”

“It wasn't your fault,” I said.

“Peter are you hurt?” he said. Silence. “Come here, son. Sit with me.”

Peter stared at his father. His eyes became glassy and two big drops of tears fell on his thighs.

“Come, my big man. Sit here.” He patted his head. “Come and sit here, son. Do not mind about the flowers. Mammie will buy another beautiful bunch. OK?”

“Dad, Mammie looked to me like a bus.” We laughed.

“Like a bus we saw yesterday,” he insisted.

“No, no my man,” Steve said. “Mammie does not look like a bus, sonny.”

“She looked too big.”

“Did she, son?”

“Mammie, you love me?”

“Of course dear. I love you. You're a good boy. Now go and have your clothes changed and get ready for tea. OK?”

“OK Mum.”

As soon as Peter left the room, Steve came to me and held my hands. He pulled me gently towards him and then kissed me even more gently. The sweetness of life began to fill my veins and I felt strong again. As we sat together in one chair, the radio played classical music. It was a piece by Mozart. Calm and gentle. In the background was the regular ticking of that wall-clock, tic-toc-tic-toc-tic-toc. It was already half past eleven. The clock had been given to me by Prof Ruhu as a wedding present. I always thought that it was a marvellous present for a wedding. But Steve always wondered why Ruhu chose a clock. As the years went by, he had convinced himself that the clock was not actually meant for me but for him. That Ruhu was reminding him of the old school and college days when Steve never arrived on time for lessons and lectures. By giving us a clock he was definitely advising him to keep time. To keep time in married life. But he always said: “How can one keep the time, a thing that does not rest? One must be able to enslave time but not to be a slave to time. Moreover, the majority don't keep it. And if you keep it alone, and you are a politician, you may become too much ahead of the majority and become a target. Who knows a target for what?” Some of his friends agreed with him and others replied: “It depends where one is and what one wants to do. If you want to relieve yourself and you do not keep to time, then who will you blame if you arrive too late?” And he would say: “Of course there are people who hurry through things unnecessarily or do things rather too soon.” He always remembered a story about Hyena, or some such animal, which wiped its anus before it actually relieved itself in order to save time!

All of a sudden the music stopped, and an announcement followed: 'This is Radio RSA, Johannesburg. It is a quarter to mid-day. We shall continue with classical music until noon when we shall.'

Steve shot up and rushed to the radio set, switched it off and fell heavily into the nearest chair with a sigh of objection: “I don't want to hear anything from South Africa in my house. Not until they discard that Hatred Policy. Damn them, those whites! Damn, damn them all down there! Hatred! Hatred! Hatred!”

He gathered himself dejectedly, walked away to the bedroom and then slumped on the bed. A wave of uneasiness and uncertainty hit my heart and the warmth of happiness flowed away leaving me hollow and confused. I saw the door, walked out of the house and hobbled away with no destination and no purpose. Someone had thrown mud in our marriage. Who would wash it away?

The following day I requested Jane to come over to my house to help solve an urgent problem. When she came, I told her what had transpired between me and Steve the previous day.

“What did Steve say?” Jane asked.

“I didn't tell him the whole story. I was afraid to.” I felt small.

“What were you afraid of?” Jane retorted.

“You never know the reactions of men.”

“What do you mean?” Jane was losing her temper.

“He might have thought that I was making up a story. That I went there of my own accord. Or something of the sort. I was just afraid. I don't know why.” Tears began to well up in my eyes.

“You know Steve very well, I don't know him as much as you do. But I don't think he would have reacted like that.”

“But you don't know how painful it is to tell your husband that your former boyfriend raped you. It is difficult, Jane.”

“Yes. But it is equally painful for the husband to be deprived of such information. What will you do if he hears the story from someone else? You were raped and you know it. Why can't you tell him the truth? You haven't told anybody?”

“No.”

“But Kit was there and he may tell a close friend of his. And that close friend of his may tell a close friend of his. In the end what you think is a secret will be a public whisper. The matter will be beyond repair if Steve learns it from other people jeering at him.”

I kept quiet.

“Where is John?” she asked.

“He has not reported for duty since then. But he wrote a letter saying that he was unwell.”

“Can I see the letter?” she said with an air of urgency.

“Why? Is it so important?”

“Yes.”

I did not want to argue with her and so I walked to my study and fetched the letter. As I walked back, she watched me intently.

“You need a rest my dear. You look exhausted,” she remarked. I kept quiet. She read the letter, taking her time. She folded it carefully and put it on the side-table.

“Has he ever written to you before?”

“No. But why? You think this is not his letter?”

“Supposing it is not, what will you do?” She asked the question I had been trying to avoid asking myself. I did not want to think about it, for I did not know what I would do.

“It is his,” I asserted.

“How do you know?”

“I feel it is.”

“How do you know?” she insisted.

“I have..., well, I'll counter-check the signature in the letter with the one on the payroll.” I kept quiet: the type of quietness that boils internally because of uncertainty. “I'll check.” I raised my face to hers.

“Do you know his house?”

“I don't know it, but one can trace it from his particulars on the employment sheet.” She stayed quiet. “You think it is not his letter?” I ventured a question.

“I think you should check on him at his house. Just drop in and see him. He might be seriously ill.” She paused. “Or even worse.”

“Oh! Come on Jane. Don't exaggerate things. Sometimes you frighten me.”

“Give me the particulars. I'll go there for you. Mike knows these places and I'm sure he will help.”

“Oh thanks. Well, how is Mike?”

“He's doing well. He was only disappointed when you didn't turn up for lunch. But I guess he is accustomed to it. He excused you gracefully.”

“That was kind of him,” I said as I went back to my study to look for John's particulars. My mind took me back to the many times I had cheated Jane and slept with Mike. Oh, God, what a beast I had been! I gave her John's particulars and then we talked about other matters of less importance; fashions, models of cars, cosmetics etc. When we exhausted the list I then asked her why she and Mike did not attend the special Sunday service.

“We were upcountry. Mike wants to buy a very big cattle ranch and we went to see it. Very big and beautiful. It will be more beautiful when it rains,” she said with a smile.

“You should have gone to offer prayers for the rain, then!”

“It's good you went to pray. If rain comes it won't discriminate against our ranch!” She laughed. “Moreover, it's good and sensible to pray for rain when you have a ranch like that for it. What would be the use of having rain if you can't benefit from it?” She laughed again.

“It can help people,” I said rather quietly. I was now arguing with a businesswoman who saw people in terms of market and labour force.

“Which people?” she threw the expected question.

“People in the whole country.”

“There isn't such a thing as people any more. We are all individuals in this country. And if one fails to prosper in a situation like this then that stupid person will die poor.”

“Oh, come on Jane, don't be absurd.”

“Anyway that's between you and me. Rain or no rain we are individuals who must survive because someone else failed.”

I kept quiet. I seemed to agree with her. We are individuals and we must survive as individuals. I have always thought so. But then there is a time when all individuals are faced with a common problem, an enemy, and ought to fight it together for the sake of everybody else.

“Don't let your books mislead you,” she said. “We are fighting a war of survival. And this man Tom and his group must be destroyed - before they destroy us,” she said in a serious tone and I noted that she had used the words 'we' and 'us' despite the fact that she was an individual. She promised that she would fight for me up to the end.

When Jane left, I steeled myself to tell Steve the whole story and face any consequences. Surely Steve would not think that I was cheating on him even to the extent of having an affair with Tom. But when Steve came I did not have the time to tell him anything. He came back home unexpectedly, and he was in such a hurry that you would think the train to heaven was leaving without him.

“It's good you are in darling. This saves me the bother of leaving a note for you,” he said as he brushed his lips on my cheek.

“Why a note, darling?”

“I'm off to Japan; leading a delegation to a certain conference.”

“When?”

“Now. Just now, dear.”

“This is rather short notice for a journey like that,” I observed.

“Yes it is. If I could have a few suits and other safari essentials packed now I would be grateful. Oh, yes. There is the paper we were working on together. It will be of some use to me. And don't forget the camera. Now that I'm going there I may as well take it to the manufacturers personally. I'll talk to the repairing team on the spot. Is there anything else that is Japanese-made which needs urgent repair?”

“Everything from that end needs repair. From a single nut up to their brains,” I said with contempt and anger.

“What is it darling? Anything wrong?” he said, looking at me, puzzled.

“Nothing.”

“Well, you sounded unwell.”

“How can you just go off like that? No notice, no preparation, nothing. Have you got to go - in such a hurry?”

“By now you should have known, dear, that there are advantages and disadvantages of being a Director. I am a Director and you should act as a Director's wife. Always expecting the unexpected.”

“Well, if this is what to be a Director's wife means then I would rather not be any more,” I said curtly.

“But why? You have never been as touchy as you are about my going. In the past there were several occasions when you learnt about my going after I had arrived. And you took it well, dear. Why change now?”

“That's why. There is a limit. Why you all the time? Why not other Directors or is it because they can't read A B C?”

“Now, what do you suggest? I resign and pack up my things and go home?”

I looked at him and something gave way in my heart and I began to cry. The moment I was ready to tell him about the man destroying our marriage was the same moment duty took him away from me. His absence would encourage Tom to torture me and maybe by the time he came back I would be as good as finished.

“Now, tell me,” he implored. “There must be something more serious than I can see.”

“Nothing you can see,” I said, sobbing.

“Then maybe I should cancel the trip. Maybe I should tell the boss about my inability to lead the delegation,” he said as he walked to the telephone.

“NO. No, don't do it. Go. I'll be all right. I think I'm being silly. I'm being selfish. I want you all to myself. I need your presence, but then I'm being unhelpful.”

He looked at me in silence.

“I'll be all right, darling. Maybe I am growing too old and weak. But I'll be OK,” I said, trying to be as calm as possible.

“I hope so. But if you feel I shouldn't go, I can cancel the trip and maybe go another time.”

“I am all right now. You should go. I am sorry about my behaviour.”

“Good. Would you like to accompany me to the airport?”

“Let me have a rest. I think it is better that way, dear.”

“OK. See you when I come back.”

“Come soon, dear.”

That evening we saw a film showing the delegation boarding the plane for Japan, and I saw Steve's bright face beaming as he waved before he entered the plane. I began to wonder why I had behaved the way I did. But I chose to go to bed early that night, after trying to eat, but in vain.

The next morning, just after six o'clock, the telephone rang. It was Jane.

“We went to John's place,” she stated.

“Oh, good! You are very practical.”

“But then John was not in.”

“Where is he?” I gasped.

“The wife doesn't know.” I waited. “But she received a letter on that very day written by himself saving that he would be on safari for a week or two.”

“On safari with who?” I said shaking.

“With you, of course!”

“Oh God.”

“So I suggest we meet in my shop and we have a good chat.”

“Do you have the letter?” I could not believe my voice. It had lost direction.

“Now let's not talk too much. Government houses are hollow. Let's meet.”

She hung up. What can I do? What does all this mean? Well, I know what it means. NO! They can't do it. Not to John. I must save him. And so I rang Komposita's house. I listened to the phone ringing at the other end and my heart was fighting against my ribs. It went on ringing, and every second added more kilos of anxiety. One minute. One minute and twenty seconds. It went on ringing and my heart called up extra energy reserves to bear the weight. One minute and fifty seconds. And then someone picked up the receiver.

“Yes?” It was a woman's voice.

“Can I speak to Mr Komposita, please?”

“Who's speaking?”

“Never mind who's speaking. It's urgent.”

“I am only his sister. Don't worry.”

“So be as good and kind as he is and let me speak to him.”

“Well if you like it that way. He is not in.”

“How can I contact him?”

“Leave a message for him or go to his office or come over here since it sounds very urgent.”

“When is he likely to come back?” I sensed some texture of harshness in my voice.

“Lunch time. Is that too far off?” she said with a slice of sarcasm.

“Yes. It will be too far off.” I banged the receiver down.

At eight o'clock, I was at Komposita's office. There were about twenty to thirty people waiting for him, and we sat in the order in which we arrived. Nobody said a word, and most of us found it the most natural thing to look down at the floor and chew our tongues. Others were grinding their teeth and you could see their temple muscles breathing. If one shot a glance at you, you could see unblinking dry glass framed in two holes. The only communication between us was the intermixed sighing of hopelessness. Although we said nothing, we talked a common language of anxiety, expressing our desire to cling to the only straw of hope, Komposita.

Presently, Komposita burst into the room like a jet of water into a burning house. Everybody tried to make signs hoping to catch his eye. We had filled forms to enable us to see him but there was nothing wrong with laying a trap for a short-cut.

“Mr Komposita!” I called out as he passed by me. And luckily enough, he stopped and wheeled around. I stood up and went to him. He beamed and then I knew that I was welcome.

“Madam Flora. What are you doing here in this cold? Come in, come in.”

“Thank you, Mr Komposita.” I felt like a child being led to a warm room after spending an hour or two in a storm. He led me to his office and asked me to sit down. Very large room, and expensively furnished too. Could this be the Komposita I knew? I could not believe it. I felt like teasing him but then I was not sure of his reaction. It was not the time to be too familiar.

“You are welcome to my office, although people who come here do not carry good news for me,” he said as he put tobacco in his pipe.

“I rang your house this morning and your sister told me you were not in.”

“My sister is very naughty,” he stated amid laughter.

“Is she your sister, really?” I asked.

“Well! These girls are funny. They choose what they want to be.” He laughed aloud. His was a sincere laugh. Like my husband's.

“I have a problem,” I said after some moments of hesitation.

“I know your problem. In fact you have been on my mind all this morning. I wanted to give you a ring the first thing I arrived here.”

I kept quiet and hung on his words.

“He will be all right. I told you I'm on your side,” he said.

“But what do they want with him?” I asked anxiously.

“Of course you know that he is the only educated Director and he therefore poses a threat. It is safe not to be educated these days. We do not want educated personalities because they make us feel insecure. They know too much, which is very bad and dangerous.”

“John is not a Director, and he is not educated,” I stated, puzzled.

“John? Who is John?” he asked, more puzzled.

“My driver. He is not at his home, he has not reported for duty for many days, and nobody knows where he is. That's why I came here so that you could help me.” I was panting.

“Oh yes. John. Well, I'm sorry Madam for I don't think I can help you regarding John. Frankly, it might be too late now.”

“Too late for what?”

“Well, Madam. I thought you had come to enquire about Mr Dota. For him it isn't too late. I know where he is. I gave my personal instructions to put his group in a safer place. Today he will come home, unharmed.”

“What are you talking about?”

“About your husband, of course! I'm telling you that he is safe. He is under my eye and that means he is safe. That is between you and me.” He looked at me and continued smoking. Was he mad or playing a game of foolishness? “I understand how you feel. Too much strain on your mind. But then, leave it to me,” he continued.

“What are you talking about?”

“I said leave it to me. He is safe. I'm not educated but then I know the difference between justice and malice. I'll fight for him. He is the light of our country. If he dies, we are doomed.”

Some kind of fear began to crawl up from the pit of my stomach. It went up and up until it reached my head.

“What do you mean you put my husband in a safer place?”

“He is safe. So trust me. Go home and have a rest.”

“If you mean that Japan is a safe place then I understand you.”

“Japan? What Japan? I thought you knew the story. Maybe, well, I don't blame you for the way you are behaving. It is a terrible thing to be told that your husband is in our hands. But don't worry. He will soon come back.”

“What is all this about, Mr Komposita? Why not be straight with me?”

“OK. You know that your husband was arrested as soon as his flight touched down at the first airport where it landed. You know that he was brought here, secretly of course, and that he is in our hands. You know that, and that is why you came to see me so that I can do something about it. And you know that I have always told you that I'm on your side and therefore your husband is safe. That's all.”

“My God!” I felt the chair sinking away from under me and I was left in space floating. I kept on floating and seeing nothing. That is all I remember.

When I came around, I was in my house, in the visitor's bedroom. My maid was seated near the bed and Komposita was standing at the window, his back facing me. I asked them how long I had been in that state and Komposita told me that it was strangely long. He had never seen a person in an unconscious state for such a long time and he was getting worried. He advised me to stay in bed and not to worry about anything as long as he was alive. He left the house. I thought of ringing my sister but changed my mind. She would also tell a friend who would tell another friend. And as she had said, what was meant to be kept secret would be national gossip. Who knows! The killer might be alerted to act quickly before the gossip spread outside the national boundaries. Once Steve was killed, the so-called international opinion would be expressed, and that would be that. There wouldn't be any more Steve for me except in memories and in Peter. So, I resisted the temptation of telling anybody else and hoped that Komposita would save my husband.

That night I heard a knock on the door to the visitor's bedroom. I was inside with Peter, both of us playing draughts. I thought it was my maid and hoped that she would enter without my saying 'come in.' And in came Tom, smiling devilishly.

“Hello Flora. I thought I should come over and see yer.”

“But it's rather late in the night,” I protested.

“That's why I came. I learnt that yee were feeling unwell. So I came.”

“Mammie, who is this man?” Peter asked.

“I'm yar uncle, young man.”

“What's your name?”

“Ask yar Mammie.”

“Why do you say yar instead of your?”

“Well, that's how uncles speak, my boy.”

“Mammie, what's his name?”

“He has no name.”

“I'll give him one. He is Nobody. Mr Nobody.”

“That's a good name, my boy,” Tom said as he stretched out his hand to shake Peter's hand. But Peter did not reciprocate.

“I don't shake hands with Nobody,” said Peter. “And I don't like you.”

“Yee ought to like yar uncle, my boy. Otherwise I won't give yee mar blessing.”

“I've seen all my uncles except you. Where have you been?”

“I live far away my boy. Now greet yar dear uncle.”

“I don't greet Nobody.”

“Peter,” I said, “you look tired. Go and sleep. It's now coming to ten.”

“But I still want to play.”

“Go and sleep dear. We shall play tomorrow OK?” I said seriously. I did not want him to witness my confrontation with Tom.

“OK Mum.”

As soon as the door was shut, I screamed at Tom, asking him why he had come to my house. Did he not know that I was a married, respectable lady? He only laughed in reply. That kind of laughter which is forced out by something ugly. No beauty in it. Then, all of a sudden he stopped laughing and looked at me. His eyes were red and they emitted danger. They had an effect on me as discomfitting as labour pains. He put his right hand in his pocket and slowly pulled out a revolver. I saw it. Words failed to come out. No scream. Nothing. He walked to the door without turning and locked it.

“Don't make any fuss.”

I was sweating. My end had come.

“This gun. You see it?”

I nodded.

“It has finished your husband.”

“Get out.” I found words, at last.

“You have no husband now.”

“Get out! Get out!”

“Except me!” he said with a repelling grin, and then aimed at me.

“Get out!” I said.

“Be sensible, little girl.”

“Out! Out!”

“Now do one thing. Show me your bed. And be quick about it!”

“No.”

Slap.

“No.”

Slap.

“No.”

“I'll kill yar. Yee'll follow yar stinking husband.”

“Kill me then. Kill me! Shoot me now. Now! Now!” I cried.

He jumped at me and began strangling me, and at the same time, he tore my clothes off me. We struggled for some good time until he overpowered me. He raped me.

“I love yee, dear. I love yee so much. That's why I've killed him. Because I love yee. He took yee from me. He threw me into prison so as to take yee. He loves yee so much that yee might forget me. So I had to kill him. I'll make yee happy. I'll make yee happier. I'll give yar a strong boy. As strong as Peter. Even stronger. Yes, I killed him in order to avenge the past. Yes, I did. I love yee, Flora. Do yee love me?”

Silence.

“Do yee love me?”

Silence.

“Yee love me!” he stated, and jumped off the bed and ran out of the room.

Slowly, with a heavy heart, I rolled off the bed where I had been raped. I marched to the door and locked it, went back and pulled sheets from the bed. I tore them into long strips and joined them together to make a long rope. I fixed the rope to a ventilator. I switched off the lights. I stood on a stool where I had just been playing draughts with Peter, and put a noose around my neck. All of a sudden I heard a knock on the door, as if someone had been watching me. I had to work quickly. I wanted to die. I had nothing to live for. Steve was dead and there was nothing to live for therefore. How about Peter? Well, Peter would always remind me of Steve and I would go on living in death. I heard another knock on the door, this time very loud. Someone was saying that I was heard shouting and saying “Kill me, kill me now!” The voice seemed to be my maid's but I had no time to listen to such little things. My major assignment was to die and join my husband, my love. I kicked the stool away and the noose gripped my neck. But before I lost consciousness, I saw some light as if someone had switched on the lights. And that's all I remember.

When I regained my consciousness, I found myself in a prison cell. A week later, I was told that I had been found guilty of treason for conspiring with my late husband, Prof Ruhu, the late Mr Kungu and others to overthrow the government. Guilty without any trial.

Guilty? Guilty of treason of all charges? Let me tell you one thing. I am not guilty and that is the truth and the whole truth. But let me add, at this juncture, that we are all guilty of the most despicable crimes. All of us. The young and the old, the educated and illiterate alike. We have allowed ourselves to be governed by greed, and our hearts are devoid of human warmth. We kill wantonly in order to possess property. Immorality is the order of the day; some young girls have been raped at gunpoint, and others forced into unwanted marriages. The society has murdered the individual as we all witness today this mockery of justice. Where is justice Mr Executioner? Where is justice Mr Judge? Where is justice if the courts of law condone this murderous wave of death? Where is justice your Grace the Archbishop? We need to rebel and remove this insensitive system that only symbolises the devil. We need to mobilise all our resources so that we blow away this drought of hope.

Mr Executioner, that is my statement. That is my story. That is my final word. Go ahead with your squad and shoot me. My husband is waiting for me.