

Oscal RANZO

Excerpt from the novel *Skeletons*

**PART I: THE ARREST**

**Chapter 1**

The arrest was executed swiftly. The two Police Patrol trucks came to a screeching halt outside the Zodiac Hotel; five fully uniformed officers jumped to the ground, and, making the least of noise, stormed into the hotel lobby. They knew exactly where to go; trooped past a visibly stunned concierge, went up one flight of steps, and tiptoed down a narrow, dimly lit corridor until they arrived outside the room they were looking for. Silence. Total silence. Then the leader of the operation, a stocky man with a thick neck and broad shoulders, gestured to the others to split into pairs and take positions either side of the door. They all did as asked, shiny AK47s held aloft. The leader was the only one without a gun. Instead he wielded a 25 pound sledgehammer, and, on the count of three, swung the rammer and brought it crashing into the door lock with all his might. The door flew open on impact, slamming against the wall with a loud bang as the cops stampeded into the room.

The room occupants were caught pants down: they'd barely recovered from the shock of the break-in when the cops descended upon them, pulled them off the bed, wrestled them to the ground, and, holding them face down, gagged them, pulled their arms behind their backs and slapped handcuffs onto their wrists. Then the operation leader told his colleagues to keep the 'felons' on the ground as he searched the hotel room high and low, picking up everything he considered incriminating, before both culprits were yanked to their feet and herded, nude as they had been found, to the waiting Police Patrol trucks. Each one was bundled on a separate truck, shoved under the bench of that truck, and followed on the double by two of the arresting policemen. The trucks left in tandem, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake as they sped off into the darkness.

\*

He lowered his camera – a DSLR Nikon D7000 with a 600mm telephoto lens – after the tail-lights of the Police trucks had vanished out of sight and drew the curtain to his window: he had been crouching behind this window all this time, furtively taking pictures of the brutal midnight raid. Dressed in checked boxers and nothing else, the athletic young man with short dreadlocks now switched on the light to his room, went and sat on the edge of his bed to browse the pictures he'd just taken. He liked the quality of the pictures; decided they all passed muster to be printed by any newspaper. All he had to do now was find out if the story behind the pictures might be good enough to catch the interest of his editor.

He'd come here on a totally different assignment: a top local musician who was rumored to be sleeping with a prominent politician's wife was in town for a concert and he'd been assigned to find some incriminating evidence on the two lovers. He'd hoped it would be easy, given that most musicians were reckless with their private lives. Finding out which hotel the musician had checked into had been easy, checking in, even easier, but he'd been on a futile stakeout for hours... and was beginning to drift off, when he was jolted awake by the shrill screech of rubber against gravel in the parking lot. He'd quickly run to the window; slightly parted the curtain, just in time to see the squad of policemen stealthily storm into the hotel.

On impulse, he'd picked up his camera, adjusted its shutter speed to capture nighttime shots, and started shooting away. Fortunately, the door to his room was positioned in direct line of sight of the narrow corridor that ran between the hotel rooms, the window offered him a bird's eye view of the parking lot, and his camera could take top-notch pictures under dim light without the use of a flash. Overall he had taken 124 shots, but, after studying all of them twice over, he identified only twelve that he was certain the editor would love: for his editor had a penchant for sleaze; and in-your-face sleaze is what the twelve pictures had in common.

Presently he heard the hum of conversation outside his room, set the camera on the bed, went and opened the door, and immediately noticed that most of, if not all the other hotel guests had come out of their rooms in various stages of undress: some in towels, others in bathrobes, others in underwear, others in pajama bottoms, but all of them remained standing by their respective doors, conversing *soto voce* about what had just happened. Promptly, he threw on a replica Chelsea FC jersey, pulled on a pair of faded jeans, stepped into the mismatching red and blue hotel slippers, picked up his note book, slung his camera around his shoulder, and went to chase the story behind the pictures.

He pricked up his ears, catching snippets of the conversations – *Two men...naked as they were born...think they were robbers...or maybe they were terrorists...why this time of the night...why the secrecy...the blast of the door was so loud...I thought it was a bomb...it interrupted my sleep...it interrupted our sex* – as he made his way towards the crime scene.

The crime scene turned out to be a deluxe version of his room: was covered from wall to wall with a ruddy woolen carpet and furnished with a king-sized mahogany bed piled high with fluffy pillows. A giant TV sat on a chest of drawers set behind the bed and there was a comfy loveseat set facing the TV. Even better the room had wall paper instead of emulsion paint, air-conditioning instead of a stand fan and had a French window which led to a small, flower adorned balcony, giving the occupant a sweeping view of the lake and the undulating green hills beyond. The room, however, was cleaned out of stuff: all the beddings save for the mattress and the pillows had been confiscated, and he had nothing upon which to start constructing his story. He moved on to the bathroom, which was twice the size of the one in his room, and was fitted with a snow-white tub in addition to the obligatory shower head and water heater. First he saw nothing significant, resigned in frustration and started to leave. Then he suddenly stopped and returned to the toilet bowl, knelt down and took a closer look at its contents: a torn and emptied sachet of lube floating on the water.

Suddenly the snippets of conversations he'd heard on his way here started to make sense...*two men...undressed...and a used sachet of lube in the toilet! So they were neither robbers nor terrorists...They were probably gay men*, he thought, drew out his camera on impulse and took several pictures of the toilet bowl. His heart raced with excitement. His editor was going to give him a pay rise after this story. With added purposefulness, he left the ransacked room and went to find someone to corroborate his suspicions. He found the hotel concierge in the hallway recounting the arrest to a group of scared guests and immediately took hostage of him.

"I'm Rasta Basta, a journalist, and I would like to ask you some questions," he said leading the concierge, a fairly tall man with a clean-shaven head, who appeared to be in his early twenties, down to the reception as the other residents went back into their rooms and turned off the lights to resume their nocturnal duties.

"Tell me what happened."

"Well as you might have seen yourself, they just picked up some criminals from room 3.14."

"What type of criminals?"

"They said I shouldn't say anything to anyone."

"Who said?"

"The police officers... they told me if they heard I had discussed this with anyone they would zip up my mouth for me."

"I just found lubricant in the toilet... was the crime sexual?" "I don't know."

"But there were two men picked up from the room, is it possible they're the ones who used the lubricant?"

"I don't know... how am I supposed to know? I'm only a concierge here."

"Okay, how often do you clean your rooms?"

"Every after a client leaves."

"So it's a possibility that the two men are the ones who used the lubricant whose sachet I found in the toilet."

“Maybe... I don’t know.”

“So it’s a possibility that the two could have been arrested for indulging in homosexuality.”

“Maybe... I don’t know... that room has been occupied by the same client for a long time... maybe he used the lubricant some other time.”

Rasta Basta saw no point in pursuing that line of questioning, so he changed tact. “But the two men were found and taken undressed as you saw.”

“Well I don’t know what was going on in there.”

“It’s 1:00 am in the night. How do you think the police got to know?” “I don’t know... I just saw them when they arrived.”

“How long have they stayed in the room?”

“The AMREF doctor has been our guest for close to a month. The other guy, I saw for the first time today.”

“Do you happen to know the name of the doctor?”

“He is called Doctor Mawlotme. Mathew Mawlotme.”

“That doesn’t sound Ugandan.”

“Actually he is not Ugandan. He is South African.”

“And the other guy?”

“He must be Ugandan. He spoke fluent Luganda.”

“Do you know his names?”

“I don’t know... I said I saw him for the first time today.”

“At what time?”

“He came asking for the doctor’s room at around 12:00am.”

“So it’s a South African doctor and a Ugandan man who have been arrested for indulging in homosexuality?”

“I don’t know... I’m not allowed to say.”

“You don’t have to... you’ve been so helpful,” Rasta Basta said, and he walked back to his room wearing the grin of someone who’d just received the news that he’d won a million dollar jackpot.

\*

The prisoner, a light-skinned man, with a hairy body and recently trimmed cephalic hair, was curled up on the cold, dusty floor of the interrogation room. He was wearing black boxer briefs and nothing else, his head lowered to touch his knees, his arms handcuffed behind his back to reveal the torso of a middle-aged man who regularly worked out. Now he lifted his head up, revealing a well-groomed face, with thick brows arched over droopy eyes that presently surveyed his surroundings. It was a drab room, whose walls were covered with peeling paint, the furniture: rickety, antiquated and piled high with dust-caked files; and the ceiling, crisscrossed with a labyrinth of cobwebs which had turned gray in places. Strung out on the wall were a fading portrait of the president, a poster urging people to be vigilant against terrorism, and a felt-written notice that read:

A BOSS IS A BOSS  
AND THERE’S NO SMALL BOSS IT’S  
ONLY A FOOL  
WHO DOESN’T RECOGNISE AUTHORITY

Glued adjacent to one that read:

WHEN YOU COME HERE  
WHAT YOU GET HERE WHAT  
YOU SEE HERE WHAT YOU  
HEAR HERE LEAVE IT HERE

.

Suddenly, the door to the room flew open and two police officers stormed inside. One was the stocky Scene of Crime Officer (Soco), who had led the raid of the Zodiac Hotel, the other, a strapping, swarthy man in a blue Safari Suit, who was so dark one could barely tell his hair apart from

his skin. The swarthy man had bloodshot eyes, whiteheads on the face, and a potbelly that bespoke a degree of indolence unbecoming of a police officer. The Soco was dressed in full Police gear.

“This is the other culprit, Afande.”

“I’m no culprit. I’m a ...”

“Shut up,” the swarthy Policeman snapped – in a voice so gruff it scared the prisoner into silence – and then turned to the Soco, “Are you sure you collected enough evidence?”

“Yes sir. We caught them in the act.”

“In what act?” The prisoner interjected.

“I said shut up.”

Silence.

“Go on.”

“Like I said, they were definitely practicing sodomy when we entered. Everything happened so fast that they were still undressed and under the same blanket when the door flew open.”

“You invaded our privacy.”

“I said shut up,” the swarthy cop roared, whacking a slap across the doctor’s face so hard it sent him toppling to the ground.

“You were saying!”

“We caught them as they were, pulled them out of bed, handcuffed them, confiscated and took pictures of all the exhibits, and then yanked them to their feet and herded them outside.”

“Did any of the other guests see you pick them up?”

“Apart from the concierge, I’m confident to say that no one witnessed the arrest.”

“Very good job. Now will you leave me alone with this pervert here? I want to interrogate him personally.”

“Yes Afande.”

As soon as the Soco left, the swarthy officer pulled a rickety metallic chair with no upholstery and sat besides the prisoner.

“I’m called Bebri Mahagame, and I’m the DPC here. I’m also in charge of the Sexual Crimes Unit, which means that all cases of homosexuality, like yours, fall under my jurisdiction.” He reached for a file on his desk and opened it. “The good thing about dealing with me, however, is that I’m a very understanding man who doesn’t want any sensible person to spend even a day in jail.”

The prisoner listened quietly.

“Now from what I have here you’re called Dr. Mathew Mawlotme, you work for AMREF and you’re the vermin that prefer to have sex against the order of nature.”

“I won’t talk to anyone without a lawyer.”

“Unfortunately according to the law here, the police are allowed up to forty-eight hours to interview a culprit before letting them see a lawyer, so you’re much better off cooperating with me if you want the next few hours to be easy for you.”

“In that case I won’t answer any questions in the absence of my partner.”

“Doctor, I usually don’t yield to the demands of my culprits, but just this one time I’ll break my rules and do so. Your partner ‘in crime’ is in the next interrogation undergoing medical examination as we speak now.”

“Undergoing medical examination! What’s happened to him?”

“You know what you did to him.”

“I did nothing wrong to him.”

“Well he is in some kind of stupor; he keeps drifting into and out of consciousness, and has been retching ever since we brought you guys in here.”

“Oh dear.”

“You need not worry, the police doctor is having a look at him, but all I can say is that whatever you did to him is not good at all.”

“If anything is wrong with him, your men are answerable; they invaded our room, our privacy to be precise, and unleashed their brutality upon us. Do you think he will be alright?”

“Drop it, will you? I’m the interrogator here, not you... I’m the one who asks the questions and you’re the criminal, your job is to answer my questions, understood?”

“Call me whatever you want to, officer, but I’m no criminal, I didn’t commit any...”

He was stopped in his tracks by a punch that came barreling into his jaw without warning; it rammed into him with such force that a blob of spittle fell out of his mouth and landed on his lap. He wanted to clean himself but his hands were restrained by the handcuffs, he found himself grunting in pain, instead, giving Bebri a fiery leer.

“You might have the right to be gay in your country, but homosexuality is illegal here. And as you might well know we have recently enacted a tough law that calls for people like you to be hanged.”

“Bollocks,” Dr Mawlotme spat out defiantly; Bebri responded by ramming another punch squarely into his nose, which sent him hurtling to the ground in a heap, bleeding profusely, and, because he was fetal, some blood ended up flowing back down his throat, choking him.

“I need a cigarette,” Bebri cursed under his breath and stormed out the room, banging the door behind him as Doctor Mawlotme writhed and retched on the ground.

Shortly after the swarthy policeman returned with a cigarette clasped between his lips, squatted in front of the doctor, and, speaking between puffs of smoke, started from where he’d stopped.

“I want you to listen very carefully doctor. I’m a policeman, and that is not an easy job because it involves arresting people and often putting them away for long terms in jail, in the process separating them from their friends and families. But I’m a very understanding man as well, and, usually, I treat my culprits so well that they buy me beers when we meet again in bars. But I hate culprits who play wise guy on me, and such people, like you, often get to see the worst of me. So I’m only asking you to be cooperative and I assure you that we will be the best of friends at the end of all this, do you understand?”

The doctor just gave him a blank stare.

“Now, as you heard, the evidence we have against you is enough to pin you in court and that could get you life in prison or at worst death. But, like I said earlier, I’m a considerate person and I don’t want you to spend the rest of your life, let alone die, in our prisons. I also know that you’re a brilliant doctor who is still too young to spend even a day in the deadly dungeons that our prisons are. Now if you and your partner cooperate with me, you could be scot-free before dawn and this whole episode would be a closed and forgotten chapter.”

“Cooperate?”

“Yes, cooperate.”

“And how do you want us to cooperate?”

“Like I said if you cooperate you could be scot-free before dawn...but I do have a price.”

“Are you trying to solicit for a bribe from me?”

“I would prefer to call it the price of freedom.”

“Freedom is free... I would die before I pay for my freedom, especially since I’m certain I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Well like I told you before, homosexuality is a serious crime in this country, and if you do not cooperate with me you’ll end up in court, be found guilty and most likely sentenced to life in prison, which is not a very good thing, you know. However, for only a little dime, I could arrange for you to be set free in the next few hours and this whole thing will be put behind us.

“And how much money are we speaking of here?”

“Only five thousand dollars, which is a pittance considering the gravity of your crime.”

The doctor gave a mocking snigger. "Listen, officer, I'm not paying a dime for doing nothing wrong."

"Then I have no option but to have you committed to trial."

"Commit us."

Without uttering another word Bebri sprang to his feet and stormed outside the room. When he returned, he was flanked with two officers. He pointed a menacing finger at Dr Mawlotme and asked them to take him to the holding cells. As they led the doctor away, Bebri beckoned one of the officers and whispered in his ears:

"Make sure he doesn't have any contact with his partner or the other inmates."

"Yes sir."

"And no one, absolutely no one, should see either of them without my permission, *onasikia?*"

The Soco nodded perceptively.

Bebri glanced at his watch and sighed in surprise.

"Goodness! It's coming up to 3:00 in the morning. I have to run home and catch some sleep. I have a hunch today is going to be a very busy day for me." And off he marched.

\*

On the way to the cells, Dr. Mawlotme was led past another interrogation room with a paneled door, ajar, upon which was plastered a notice that said:

**TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC** *Police Bond is  
your right and is free Do not pay for it  
Whoever asks for money please ring the  
following numbers:*

But the digits were too small for him to make out. He cursed silently and peeked inside the room, saw another barely dressed prisoner lying in the fetal position on the ground, groaning and shivering tremulously. He instantly noticed that it was his partner and started to call out his name.

"Sholex my love, what have they done to ..." only to be silenced with a barrage of kicks, punches and abuse that assailed him in rapid succession, at the same time as the door to the room was closed. Finally his tormentors seized him by the briefs and half-carried him across the police yard until they came to a cell block which had a wrought iron door with a sizeable barred slat. The faces of three men were pressed against the barred slat, looking sad, despaired, hungry, and they all barely moved as the policemen unlocked the door, pushed it open and herded Dr Mawlotme into a narrow corridor lined with dingy cells crammed with half-dressed inmates.

Dr Mawlotme felt sick to the core the instant he entered the holding cells. He had never been inside such a filthy place in his life, never been in close proximity with such unkempt men, and never been in the same building with so many criminals. The foul stench inside the place forced him to hold his nostrils between his fingers as he was led down the corridor, past five cells, all of which were jam-packed with bare-chested, slumbering inmates spooning eastward against each other. As they walked past the cells 3 and 4, he heard a voice shout 'West' and then saw all the prisoners turn over simultaneously to face west. He cringed at the prospect of the diseases he might contract in this place.

At the dead end of the corridor, they finally came to a stop outside an ablution with a grilled-iron door, upon which was nailed a wooden placard that read **Out Of Order**. Inside the room was a toilet bowl that had turned brown with scum, broken plumbing that had been gnawed by rust,

and a thick cloud of cobwebs in which were trapped dead ants, mosquitoes, flies and roach poop. Drying patches of urine meandered across the floor, and a thick bed of algae had formed at the corners of the walls and the floor, effectively giving them a slimy green color. A huge padlock was in place to prevent inmates from accessing this room. Yet now some of the prisoners watched in awe as the Soco drew a bunch of keys from his trouser pockets, found the one he was looking for, opened the padlock and pulled the door open with a squeak.

“Since you prefer men to women,” the Soco said, “We will have to prevent you from feasting on these inmates,” and then signaled his colleagues to fling Dr Mawlotme into the filthy room, promptly slamming the door shut after him and securing it with the padlock. Dr Mawlotme broke in a loud rant, protesting the inhuman treatment, and calling them corrupt savages; they called him a sick homo in return, laughing as they locked up the main door to the holding cells and tottered off. The doctor kept hurling abuse after them, assuring them that he was going to defeat them in court.

“Shut up you,” the RP (Rough person), title for the leader of the prisoners, shouted at the doctor as soon as the cops were out of earshot.

“Mind your business, will you,” Dr Mawlotme shot back through the bars to his filthy cell.

“What?” The RP asked, rising from his sleeping space. He went and carried the topless jerry can that served as the inmates’ ablution, pranced to Dr Mawlotme’s cell and emptied its contents on the doctor’s face.

“*Kula mavi wewe Shoga,*” he taunted, sending all the other inmates into convulsions.

Dr Mawlotme charged at the RP, only to be impeded by the bars that separated them. He lunged at the bars, trying to break free so he could make the guy pay for his affront, but his efforts passed in vain. In the end he pressed his head against the bars, clenched his hands into fists and found himself breaking into tears as the malodorous excretion dripped down his body. His tears, though, were not tears of sorrow or self pity: they were tears of anger.

## Chapter 2

“I did not steal the baby; she was just dumped at my doorstep,” the svelte white woman with a choppy blonde fringe snapped at the police woman, her face flushed with anger.

The policewoman was a dumpy, busty type, decked out in a well pressed khaki uniform and the mandatory black beret. Her name tag identified her as SPC Apophia. She leaned back in her seat, folded her bulky arms across her chest and then asked coolly, “By whom?”

“How am I supposed to know? I woke up, dressed up to go jogging (she was clad in aqua running shoes and a pink Adidas tracksuit) opened the door and there was this baby lying in a rattan cradle at my doorstep.”

“And who do you reckon put it there?”

“Are you deaf? I thought I just said I don’t know.”

“Did you try to find out?”

“Of course, I did. I raised an alarm. I alerted the Local Council chairman and together we went house to house and shop to shop, asking if anyone knew the parents of the baby, but everyone said they neither knew who she belonged to nor how she had gotten at my doorstep.”

“Where is the baby now?”

“I’ve left her at Malaika babies’ home. I’m trying to get them to take her in for now as we wait for her parents to turn up...but they say they’ll only do that if I give them a police report, which is what I’m here to get.”

“Ah I understand... but why do you think they abandoned the child at yours of all doors?”

“Probably because I’m Mzungu.”

“So?”

“They think I’ve got the money to care for a baby I didn’t bear in the first place.”

“But why would someone want to abandon their baby?”

“Because they were stupid enough to have her when they didn’t have the means to support her.”

“I don’t know why I don’t believe you.”

“What? Are you still insinuating that I stole the baby?”

“There so many cases of child trafficking these days.”

She had already been unhinged by the whole baby-at-the-doorstep situation, and was just being very patient with the policewoman because she wanted to have the baby’s admission into Malaika babies’ home sorted and move on with her life. But the cop’s persistent insinuation that she might have stolen the baby eventually tipped her over the edge. Without thought she sprung to her feet and leaned in on SPC Apophia, her fringe falling over her face in such a way that from the sides all you saw was the rapid movement of her pouty lips.

“Look woman,” she rasped, “I’m a qualified Journalist, and if I wanted to I could be earning decent money doing my job back home, but I came here as a volunteer, and I have spent the better part of a year in rural areas teaching underprivileged children without receiving or expecting any pay. I chose to do this not because I had no job back home, but because I feel I have been fortunate to be in my position and so should share with the less privileged of the world. Now it’s not my problem that one of your compatriots chose to have a baby and then decided to abandon her. Neither is it in my interest to steal abandoned African babies because that will never be a lucrative business venture and I particularly have never liked babies. I’m only taking the care because I’m a responsible person and I respect the fact that every child has the right to...jeeeezzz.” On the spur of the moment, she halted her tirade and whipped her hands up to cover her nose.

“What on earth is that stench,” she asked in muffled speech, casting her gaze in the direction of the malodor, just in time to see, outside the room in which they were, a barely-dressed hairy man with thick eyebrows and big droopy eyes being herded across the verandah by two policemen.



“It must be him,” SPC Apophia said, unbothered by the horrible smell.

“Gosh. It’s like he’s just been picked up from a sewer.”

“Our cells are not sewers, madam”

“Whatever, I can’t take his stench anymore, I’m suffocating in here.” And she stormed out of the office, leaving SPC Apophia shaking her head with a mixture of scorn and bedazzlement.

\*

Rasta Basta watched the svelte blonde in jogging things pace out of the police station with her right hand cupped over her nose and mouth and wondered what had happened to her. He had just entered the station himself, and, as far as he was concerned, there was no smell around the station that was so odious as to evoke such reaction. *Either some cop farted for her or she thinks all Africans stink*, he thought as he approached the Police enquiry desk. A skinny policeman with a weather-beaten face and a lush moustache sat behind the desk, munching from a maize cob. The name tag on his khaki uniform identified him as SPC Twinomujuni.

“May I help you?”

“Yes sir. I’m a freelance journalist, and I’m here to see two prisoners who were brought in late last night.”

“Do you know their names?”

“One of them is a South African Doctor known as Mathew Mawlotme, However I don’t properly recall the names of other guy.”

The cop reached under the antiquated reception desk and brought out a colossal case book. He carefully leafed through the dog-eared pages till he got to the one he wanted and used his fore finger to scroll down the list of the registered inmates.

“We don’t have any Dr. Mawlotme in the register sir,” he finally announced.

“Are you certain?”

“Here is the case book... check for yourself.”

Rasta Basta scanned the list. “You’re right there is no Dr. Mawlotme in here.”

“Are you satisfied?”

“But I don’t understand, maybe they forgot to register them. They were definitely arrested late last night.”

“Sir, you’ve probably heard the saying which goes that the police station doors are the only doors that remain wide open year in year out. In fact, if someone stole those doors, no one might ever notice. There only reason people haven’t stolen them is because there is a fully awake officer at this counter 24/7, and the role of that officer is to record all incoming inmates among other things. If your prisoners had been brought here, he or she would definitely have registered them, understood?”

Rasta Basta looked unconvinced but nodded his assent.

“Maybe you should try Nalufenya Police Station,” Twinomujuni offered.

“That’s where I went before coming here. They are not there; actually the officers over there are the ones who told me the prisoners must have been brought here.”

“Fortunately, as you can see, all our inmates are undergoing the morning head count. You may go check for yourself if the prisoners you’re looking for are among them.”

In the distance, Rasta Basta could see that shirtless prisoners were squatting in front of a platoon of police officers for the morning head count. He went and checked them out as Twinomujuni had suggested and was disappointed to find that none of the inmates bore even the slightest semblance to the men in the pictures he had taken at the hotel.

He walked out the station without saying bye to Twinomujuni.

\*

It was already 10:00am but Jinja town was just showing the signs of waking up. Main Street was barely populated, the few people on the balustrade, strolling leisurely as though they had nothing serious to accomplish. A score of *boda-boda* bikes were parked on street corners, their riders straddling them, slapping the saddle invitingly whenever a pedestrian walked by and then driving off steadily in the event that said pedestrian decided to use their services. The occasional car, when it drove by, also did so at the speed of a steam engine train.

*This is why I Love this town*, the svelte white woman thought as she sat there on the police steps, taking in lungful after lungful of air. The fresh air outside had been the perfect antidote to the odious stench inside. And because it was a town with little traffic, and whose streets were lined with evergreen trees and flowers, the air she took in was clean and devoid of the pungent odor of exhaust. The only alien smells she picked up were those of oriental food spices, thanks to two Indian restaurants located opposite the Police station. She closed her eyes to savor the fresh air.

And just then a fresh, woody perfume wafted into her nasal cavity. The perfume’s fragrance started off as a whiff of ginger infused with bergamot and cardamom, but soon projected itself as a pleasant blend of green mandarin, cedar wood, nutmeg and white rose that massaged her nostrils sensuously, tickling her olfactory receptors, evoking a sweet sensory pleasure that made her forget about her troubles – if only fleetingly. She opened her eyes to trace the origin of the scent...and was surprised to find that it came off an athletic young man with short dreadlocks, dressed casually in white trainers, ripped navy jeans and a striped polo T-shirt. He was pacing purposefully out the Police station, sparking a rat race at the *boda-boda* stage across the road as a group of riders jostled to carry him.

“Nice perfume,” Laura said on impulse, and then suddenly wished she could take back the words.

The young man stopped and turned, smiling when he realized who’d just complemented him.

“Thank you... It’s called...”

“Burberry Brit for men, by Thomas Burberry.”

The man was visibly as impressed as he was surprised. “Spot on... How did you know?” He asked, tilting his head quizzically.

“Let’s just say I’ve got a great olfactory vocabulary,”

“I see,” Rasta Basta said cynically, and then quickly added, “Speaking of which, I just saw you clutching your nostrils between your fingers as you stormed out of the Police station, does that imply that our Policemen stink.”

“Please don’t remind me. There was this inmate with an awful stench inside there...I just couldn’t stand it.”

“The state of our prisons is not the best, I should admit.”

“Guess that makes ours as comfy as hotels,” she quipped and they both broke in chuckles.

There was a brief lull, during which Laura caught the sweet-smelling man glance at his watch.

“Sorry I held you up... you seemed to be in a rush.”

“Actually I’m: all morning I’ve been trying to trace the whereabouts of some two prisoners, in vain. And I’m so mad because I really wanted to do a story on them...”

“You’re a journalist?”

“Yep.”

“I studied journalism too.”

“So are we chasing the same story?”

“No, I’m not chasing any stories. Actually you could do a story on my situation, I got a baby abandoned at my doorstep, and some police woman in there is insinuating that I could have stolen the baby instead.”

“That’s not news here.”

“Why?”

“Happens all the time,” he said and then glanced at the clock on his phone again. “Look, I better run and finish my story lest I miss my deadline,” he said and started to walk towards the *boda-boda* stage. He stopped suddenly and drew a card from his wallet. “My name is Rasta Basta by the way, and that’s my business card.” He handed her the card. “Call me anytime and we talk more about perfumes and journalism.”

“Thanks, but I’m sorry I am still a volunteer and have no business card to give you.” “It’s okay, as long as you’ve got a name for me.”

“Of course I do!” she said and they both giggled, “I’m called Laura.”

“Nice to meet you, Laura.” Wink, wink.

“Nice to meet you too, Rasta Basta.” Wink ignored, and she put the card in her cloth bag as the sweet-smelling man hailed a *boda-boda* and sped away, together with his lovely scent - now a soothing blend of tonka beans, oriental wood and grey musk.

Hardly had his perfume ebbed out of range than another distinctive smell, the ethereal scent of recently washed clothes, wafted into her nostrils. She looked behind her to find that Apophia, the annoying police woman, was walking towards her, waving a white sheet of paper in her hand.

“Here’s your police report, madam”

“Oh thanks a lot,” Laura said, literally snatching the report from the policewoman’s hand, so grateful that the lady had saved her from re-entering that unpleasant smelling place.

\*

Malaika Baby’s Cottage was housed in a sprawling, double-storied, colonial-era mansion located in the lakeside environs of Jinja town. The home had a nursery, two dorms, a dispensary, a play ground for older children and was surrounded by a fortified wall fence. Laura climbed off the *boda-boda*, paid her fare and stepped through the gate as the motor bike sped away. She clutched a crash helmet in one hand and a bagful of baby goodies in the other, walked straight to the dorm in which the baby had been placed, to find that she had finally cried herself to sleep and was still dead to the world. Careful not to wake her, she placed a little brown teddy bear inside the cot and then went to the offices to conclude the admission formalities.

The orphanage was managed by an amiable English girl with a beatific smile called Rhiannon. She was buxom, pretty, chatty and definitely loved babies. She told Laura they had run tests on the girl and found that she was in perfect health – just malnourished. She had even given her a name, Zahara – which Laura thought was quite cool – and said they would be giving her immunization shots soon. Rhiannon finally told her that the orphanage had been inundated with babies (it housed over one hundred babies,) and yet they were short on funding; so they would only admit the girl on the condition that Laura would fully sponsor her stay at the home.

Laura said she would without batting an eyelid.

Ironically she had vowed to never have children and always told her friends she would never make a good mom. Yet in the few hours since Zahara had been dumped at her door – and it occurred to her that no one was willing to reclaim her – she’d found herself doing things she’d never thought she would be able to do: like buying baby clothes and mixing formula and changing diapers; feeding her; rocking her when she started crying; soothing her to sleep, and now, accepting to meet her orphanage maintenance costs despite the fact she didn’t have any meaningful source of income and would not do so for some time.

Zahara awoke shortly after and let it be known to all and sundry by venting a piercing cry. Rhiannon rushed to the nursery to fetch her before she should awake the others and brought her out for Laura.

“Oh look at my baby,” Laura said, taking the little bundle in her hands. “Look, she is so cute.”

“I wonder why any woman would dump such a beautiful baby.”

“It’s a crazy, crazy world. “ Then after a brief lull, “Do you know the police woman tried to accuse me of trafficking her?”

“Did she?”

“She kept on hinting about it until I went mental on her,” Laura said, and then related the whole Police incident to Rhiannon, rocking Zahara in her hands as she did so.

The toll of an electric bell interrupted their conversation.

“Lunch time, Rhiannon announced, “do you want to help me feed the babies?”

“Of course.”

Laura ended up spending the rest of the day at the babies’ home. She played with Zahara and fed her and sang for her lullabies. She quickly learnt that Zahara was a possessive child: every time Laura put her down to play with the other children, she would break in loud screeching cries that only stopped after she picked her up again. She also had a good appetite, had consumed

three bottles of formula in a couple of hours. By the time she fell asleep again, it was coming up to 5:00pm and Laura felt as exhausted as she was famished. She thanked Rhiannon for all her help, told her she was starving, and invited her to a late lunch. Rhiannon thanked her but turned down the invitation on the ground that she couldn't step away from the home for longer than one minute. Laura told her she shouldn't kill herself working, hailed a *Boda-boda* and went to find something to eat.

Ozzie's was Laura's favorite eatery in Jinja. She sat on a three-legged rattan chair outside the restaurant and savored the delicious aroma of pastries floating on the waft from the kitchen. She ordered for a vegetable burger and a tropical fruit slushy, and was kicking her heels waiting for the food, when a stinging odor of dry sweat suddenly assaulted her nostrils. She turned her head on impulse to find that the smell was coming from a scruffy newspaper vendor, who was walking towards her steadily, displaying the front pages of all the national dailies for whoever cared to read. She was about to dismiss him when the headline of *The Red Pepper* caught her attention. SODOMY! It screamed in big block white type set against a faint black background; and below that, the subtitle read: BUM-DRILLERS SMOKED OUT OF JINJA HOTEL. Laura didn't buy the paper because the vendor smelled repulsively, but she made a mental note to get herself a copy after having her meal.

[...]