

# Mombasa

## **Preface:**

*After returning from Africa, I kept among my special souvenirs and vital papers, a tiny glass vial. It was purchased in the Arabian Perfume Shop in Mombasa, Kenya, in 1984. Once in a while— especially on gloomy winter days— I would dig it out of the briefcase in the back of my closet and take a meditative sniff. The contents of the vial eventually dried up, but the scent lingered. For years afterwards, even my marriage certificate bore a faint trace of that exotic redolence of Mombasa...*

*At the time of the Mombasa trip in April 1984, I was still single and living in Zimbabwe. Among the many old friends and acquaintances with whom I corresponded was Bella K., a former colleague in the school in Tanzania where I'd worked a few years before. Although my vacation in April 1984 was primarily planned for Kenya, I expected to make a quick trip across the border to see Bella at her new home in Arusha. Depending on how well our visit went, I considered inviting her along on the trip to Mombasa.*

*I took extensive notes of that 1984 trip but four years later, ripped them out of my journal. In sorting through my papers before returning to Canada, I was loath to be reminded of details of the last weeks before settling down. Still, the torn-out pages were absently stuffed into a box of old teaching materials selected to be shipped.*

*Just last year I rediscovered them. Any potential reader will understand my dilemma in deciding whether to transcribe—let alone post them. As always in my postings—only names have been fictionalized.*

*So, with due apologies to all concerned, I take this plunge.*

*-2016*



## 1

*Nairobi, April 13<sup>th</sup> 1984*

I was filling out the currency declaration form in the lineup in the arrivals queue of Jomo Kenyatta international, muttering calculations of dollars into shillings when I was startled to hear from behind:

“F.!”

The grey-haired guy couldn’t possibly be— but indeed was—

“Gerard!”

It was Gerard M., a former Marist Brother and teaching colleague from Tanzania with his beaming Hutu wife, Fortunata, cradling a new-born infant. Behind them was a little lad pushing the baggage cart—a boy who was born in the Moshi hospital while his father stayed at my place in Weru-Weru, four years before. He was now a bright-eyed coffee skinned tyke yammering “papa, papa!”

Gerard and his family had just flown in from Kigali, Rwanda, where he had been working at a mission school since leaving Tanzania. With me just flying in from Harare: what were the odds that that our paths would again cross at the busy Jomo Kenyatta International Airport?

Within a half-hour we were sharing a taxi up into the Ngong Hills north of Nairobi. Our fare was at least doubled by the circling of several roundabouts in search of the Catholic Mission house which Gerard expected to put us up for the night.

When the baleful Swahili driver finally reached the address, I waited in the taxi with Fortunata and the babies. Gerard went up the blind-drawn parish house where for several minutes he chatted in the doorway with a white-haired priest, a fellow Quebecois whom he knew from his years as a Marist Brother. After about fifteen minutes, the missionary came out to the waiting taxi with Gerard and apologetically informed that due to a visit from a priest from an outlying mission, the parish course was unable to provide us hostelry. Nonetheless, the old priest insisted on showing us to a nearby guesthouse and joining us for a late dinner. When he went back inside the mission house for his jacket, Gerard fumed:

“Well, we can hardly expect him to help us when so many of us show up together!”

That remark riled— since at the airport I’d suggested to Gerard we might meet tomorrow for breakfast. I had only submitted to tagging along to the Ngong Hills at the kindly Fortunata’s insistence.

In any case, accompanied by the priest, we booked into a nearby colonial-style guest house. After a decent supper at the expense of the persistently apologetic priest, we retired to the firelit lounge, where over a couple of Tuskers I joined in a familiar excoriation of Tanzania and *Ujaama* [Tanzanian socialism]. In the unease of hindering the fellow Quebecois from chatting in their native language, I excused myself early.

The 150-shilling rate for my spartan (but clean) room was double that of comparable accommodation down on Tom Mboya St. where I had intended to stay. Even with a throbbing head, I still slept soundly enough.



I woke the following morning at 7:30 AM, slightly woozy from the beers. After stomaching a bowl of watery oatmeal and bidding goodbye to Gerard (understandably nervous to be heading back to Montreal after 15 years in Africa) I caught a jolting *matatu* downtown.

By 10:00 AM, I was squeezed into a Peugeot 504 for the haul south to the Tanzanian border at Namanga. I made the border just after midday and stopped for a nostalgic (although warmish) beer at the same Shell petrol station café where I last saw Bella K. in Sept. '81. She had accompanied our Danish colleagues, the Pramblings, who had given me a lift to the border to begin my 'escape' from *Ujamaa*.

Shouldering the pack, I walked down the dirt road past the *dukas* on the Kenyan side stopping only to buy a roll of toilet paper before getting the Kenyan exit stamp.

Walking up between the gauntlet of *dukas* and kiosks in the no-man's land between the border posts was a tall beauty in purple corduroys and matching pumps.

"Bella!"

The former teaching colleague blinked her dark doe eyes and smiled. She then lightly shook my hand in Tanzanian fashion and gave me the same peck on the cheek with which she bade me *adieu* at precisely the same place three years before.

"I've got a big list," she nodded, pulling forth a foolscap paper and a roll of Tanzanian bills. Without as a moment's hesitation she set about haggling for soap, toothpaste, baby clothes, toilet paper—goodies unavailable just a few meters over the fence in socialist Tanzania.

Sitting on my backpack on the side of the dusty road, I watched her nimbly moving up and down the line of kiosks. After a half hour, with her sisal bags bulging with purchases, she signaled for me to join her in moving towards the Tanzanian customs post.

“Don’t worry,” she said brightly, “I know the boss—everything is fixed.”

With a wink and grin, she greeted the big-bellied Customs man who waved us through.

Squeezed into a battered *matatu* for the hot stuffy ride into Arusha, she reverted to the brusque Commerce teacher I remembered too well:

“O, F.”, she said, awkward amid the stares of the fellow passengers, “always so many questions!”

Other passengers stared back and forth between the pale face of the *mzungu* and that of Bella.

For most of the journey, we silently watched the road ahead although at one point, she touched my elbow and said:

“So, we go to Mombasa together, *oui*? And you have US dollars? You will sell some to me?”

It was curious that her English now had a slight French accent. I guessed she had acquired it during her visit to Rwanda where she stayed with Gerard and Fortunata. It was not hard to guess why Fortunata was suspicious.

It was mid-afternoon before we pulled into the drop-off point outside the Arusha market. Overanxious to get out of the crammed back seat, I skinned my balding pate on a protruding metal shard.

“Careful, F, my goodness!”

Embarrassed by my haplessness, I walked along behind Bella, dabbing a bloody tissue into the gouge. I hardly presented the spectacle of a fellow that a smartly attired woman would be keen to walk beside. Still, I wondered whether she would invite me to stay at her place.

“So, I guess I need a hotel,” I said, hinting I would not balk at the option of staying at her place.

“You’re staying at the New Arusha,” she said.

“The New Arusha? That’s out of my budget range. I can even sleep on a corner patch of your floor if—”

“It’s all arranged F.,” she gave a cold smile.

“But really, Bella.”

“No problem, Mr. F.— I know the manager. It’s all arranged.”

Moments later, I was introduced to one Mr. Tatotola, who like Bella, was a Haya from Bukoba on Lake Victoria. From this ‘brother’ Bella had procured a discount room for the visiting *mzungu*. After shaking his hand, I handed Mr. Tatotola a bottle of Zimbabwean Cold Duck.

Ah, this is excellent!” he smiled warmly, tucking the bottle behind a dusty file cabinet before going back to his Dar es Salaam *Daily News*. It was pleasing to see the first genuine smile in Tanzania.

A half-hour later, while Bella sat on the chair by the open door of my room, I dumped on the bed the bag of items from Zimbabwe she had requested in her letter, two weeks before. Her tight smile left no doubt that the travel bag was too small, the shoes too big, even the scented body lotion too greasy. Yet after her grim perusal of the items, when I took a U.S. \$20 bill out of my pouch for currency exchange, her eyes lit up.

“Can I see it?” She delicately sniffed it. “So this is what *real* money looks like—the diamond of the world!” Rubbing Andy Jackson’s grey cheek against her own, she purred.

Momentarily, her disappointment in the Zimbabwean baubles was forgotten.



Bella returned at dusk and joined me in a walk through the grimy streets of Arusha. In passing the pathetic offerings in the windows of souvenir shops, she stopped up suddenly:

“I want to go overseas to study, F. I want more than *anything* to do that. Tell me: how can I get to Canada?”

“That’s hard to know.” Taken aback by her appeal, I could only give a stilted reply. “I’m really not the person to ask. You know I wasn’t very happy there before going to Zimbabwe.”

Pursing lips she stared at the empty shop window.

“Just think of that old English saying,” I awkwardly continued, “you know— ‘the grass is always greener on the other side’”.

I could almost smell the smoke of grinding gears...

Back at the New Arusha Hotel snack bar, we ordered chicken and chips. She drank cokes and I had two yeasty Tanzanian lagers.

“Would you like more beer, F.? You want another?”

I was on my third while Bella surveyed the bar over my shoulder. Slightly befogged by the sour brew, I made an off-hand proposition:

“You know you don’t have to go home tonight, Bella. You could stay here with me.”

“You’re joking, *oui!*” she smiled looking towards a Tanzanian Lothario in an open shirt who leaned over the table behind.

After excusing myself for the gent’s room, I came back to see her chatting with the same fellow. Her hand was casually sliding over the back of his chair, innocently brushing against his crotch.

Struck more resoundingly than by the jagged metal of the *matatu* door, I only then fully fathomed the warning of Fortunata before the fireplace in Ngong Hills last night:

“*Bella’s like a snake—moving this way and that!*”

As if I didn’t know her well enough from Weru-Weru! Before even imagining the possibility of some warmer encounter, I should well have remembered that day I got a lift from the school to Moshi with the middle-aged businessman she introduced as her ‘*rafiki*’. Assuming that I did not understand, he first queried her in rapid Swahili about the *mzungu* in the back seat and then teasingly asked: “*Unafikiri yeye ni mzuri?* [‘Do you think he’s handsome?’]”

“*Hapana cabesa!*” [Absolutely not!] she said shrilly.

What had possessed me last month in dangling in my letter the possibility of travelling together with her to Mombasa?

Back in the lumpy bed of room #39, I considered the balance sheet in what seemed to be Bella’s own cold calculus. The Commerce teacher got shoes, cosmetics, toiletries, travel bag, handkerchiefs and a necklace. The *mzungu* visitor got a night in the New Arusha (probably arranged free by the manager), *matatu* fare from Namanga to Arusha, a plate of chicken and chips and three Kilimanjaro lagers... It seemed we were roughly square.

I was thus tempted to leave her a polite note and take off at the crack of dawn for Moshi. There I could get a cheap room there and visit the Horombo sisters at my old school, Weru-Weru. I could head back to Namanga the following day, without stopping in Arusha... Under the shadow of Mount Meru, I decided to sleep on it.



In waking the next morning— my mind was made up. I would head to Moshi rather than stay the two more nights here that Bella had apparently arranged.

After checking out of the New Arusha, I took a long walk. Just as anticipated from the front page of the morning's English *Daily News*, Sokoine Rd., the main thoroughfare, was filled with throngs of mourners. They were waiting for the funeral procession of a popular Federal Cabinet Minister. He was an educated Maasai of local origin—felled prematurely by a heart attack. After watching the flower-bedecked caisson in military jeep escort, roll slowly past, I returned to the New Arusha hotel lobby. I intended to write a note for Bella, politely extending *asante sana* and *kwaheri* [thanks and goodbye].

I was alone in the coffee bar (the waiters listening on the radio to the funeral) scribbling my note when she appeared.

"F. where are you going?" she cried, "you are booked for three nights!"

There was no doubt that her overriding concern was how she would explain my abrupt departure to the manager. It was only to spare her that embarrassment that I submitted to a final night in the New Arusha.

Back in the lobby, she 'helped' me check in again. Her explanation to the desk clerk for my checking out was that that her *mzungu* visitor from Canada seemed to be suffering from culture shock.

She waited in the lobby while I reluctantly took my bag back to the room. At the same time, I realized that it was time to clear up any misunderstanding about Mombasa. Still, as a face-saving gesture, I decided to ask if she'd like to accompany me back to Nairobi, where I catch my flight.

"OK, Mr. T.," she said with a tsk.

As expected, she had already concluded that the rare shopping opportunity was not worth the awkwardness. Still, I countered her turn to formality (*Mr. T.?*) with another awkward gesture. Outside the hotel, I offered her one of the digital watches I'd bought in a street kiosk last year in Durban, South Africa.

“You can trade it for something else,” I muttered. With a curt thanks she slipped it on her wrist.

Yet as prearranged yesterday, we walked to her place for tea. Along the busy Sokoine Rd. and up Kanisa Rd. towards her compound, we were stopped several times for handshakes and greetings by her many acquaintances. From customs’ officials, hoteliers, to soldiers and police: Bella was certainly well-connected.

Her accommodation was modest— much more spartan than the duplex she shared on the school compound in Weru-Weru. The private college where she worked provided her only with two rooms and a shared ‘choo’[toilet]. Although I did not ask, I gathered that her salary at the secretarial college was also less than she had got at the government secondary school. There was no evidence that it was any easier to scrap by on a teacher’s salary than it had been three years previously.

Still, she kept a tidy place. Her pans and plates were neatly stacked by her kerosene cooker and the concrete floor shone. The wall was decorated with the same tendril-trailing planters made from light bulbs which she had had on the living room wall of her flat at Weru-Weru.

As I sat at the table in her cramped kitchen, she prepared the tea and brought out a packet of biscuits, one of the few treats available in the near empty shops. After she squeezed into her chair, she nibbled and sipped mostly in silence.

Her prim manner almost seemed a demonstration of just how ‘European’ she could be in the presence of a *mzungu*. How desperately she wanted to go overseas!



Upon the exhaustion of small talk, I excused myself for the rest of the day.

In early afternoon, I walked alone to the market where I caught a *matatu* to Moshi, Kilimanjaro District, eighty kilometres to the east. I could not leave Tanzania without at least a glimpse of the town where I’d come to scrounge for supplies every week, three years previously. Alighting ninety minutes later near the Moshi clocktower, I did a circuit through the familiar streets grown even shabbier in my absence. Although a few locals could not have failed to recognize a *mzungu* with an empty sleeve, my brief reappearance received only a few furtive scowls. Bitterly recalling the hours spent standing in queues, I was on a bus back to Arusha within an hour.

In the return trip clouds still shrouded the closeup view of the snowy dome of Kibo. The only view of Kilimanjaro I am likely to get will be on the plane heading back home from Nairobi.

Meanwhile, the throat tightened again at *mila sita* just as it had in passing the turn off to the former school on the incoming trip. What chance of passing through the school gates without alerting the principal, Mama K? There was definitely no appetite for exchanging pleasantries with the former taskmistress. Thus, the earlier notion of briefly stopping to greet the Horombo Sisters was abruptly quashed.

Back at the New Arusha Hotel, Bella met me again for a dinner of chicken and chips—the only available item on the menu. That night I declined the dreadful Kilimanjaro beer. She was more subdued than the previous evening—her dark eyes more often downcast than roving around the bar. A poised and comely woman she certainly was... For a moment, I was tempted to reoffer the withdrawn invitation to Mombasa.



The following morning—a day earlier than planned—Bella and I were squeezed together again in the back of a *matatu* passing through the same gauntlet of police and military roadblocks on the road to Namanga we'd negotiated just three days before.

In every bump towards the Kenyan border, she flinched away. In passing through the no-man's land between the borders, she walked several paces ahead. In the 504 from Arusha to Nairobi, scarcely a dozen words passed between us.

We arrived in downtown Nairobi (named from '*cold place*' in Maasai) in late afternoon. The market where the *matatus* unloaded was just a few blocks from Tom Mboya Road and the Iqbal Hotel where I stayed on my stopover in Nairobi in September 1981. I rented a double room.

After dropping bags, we took an awkward walk along bustling Moi Ave. This time she walked even further ahead, making no effort to hide her interest in the finely tailored business suits that passed.

Before the early equatorial sunset, I got some greasy meat pies which we ate in silence in the room. Coming back from the shared bathroom in the hallway, Bella looked nervously at the gap between the twin beds.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said pulling the outer bed farther apart. With at least a metre between us she took the inner bed. She wrapped herself tightly in the blankets and turned to the wall.

When tired of flipping through the fistful of tourist brochures grabbed from the lobby, I turned out the light. She immediately creaked closer to the wall.

“Bella,” I croaked in the dark, “I’m sorry for any misunderstandings.”

“I want to go straight to sleep,” she hissed, “no talking please!”

I was seized by a pang of bitterness. “Hey— you don’t have to go to sleep so early,” I taunted, “—there’s a bar downstairs with plenty of well-dressed guys!”

I turned back towards the door, jabbed by the cruelty of my words.



When at first morning light I came back from the bathroom, Bella was sitting on her bed, zipping her travel bag with the Zimbabwe logo.

“I’m going home today,” she said.

“You can stay another day,” I said. “My flight to Mombasa isn’t until noon tomorrow.”

“I want to go home this morning.”

“If that’s the way you want it.” Gritting teeth, I pulled out my wallet. “Here’s for your *matatu* fare— and something to eat on the way back.” I stuffed a Kenyan 20-shilling note and a \$10 US bill into her hand. She neither gripped, nor let them drop.

This time she followed as I led the way back to the corner of the market where the 504s awaited passengers for Namanga. She watched from behind as I put another 20-shilling note in the hand of the driver. The last image I caught of her, she was standing by the 504, arms folded, staring straight ahead.

I walked back to the Iqbal Hotel in a comingling of guilt and relief...

\*\*\*\*\*

2



*Mombasa, April 19<sup>th</sup> 1984*

Stepping off the airport bus in the centre of the old town, I took a deep lungful of the steamy air, hung my jacket over the strap of my backpack and scanned the busy street for a bank.

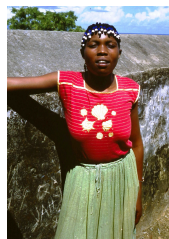
A little dazed in the welter of heat and noise, I barely avoided being drawn into an alley by two money-change touts tempting a hapless *mtalii* [tourist] with a *magendo* [black market] rate.

Just as I reached for my money pouch (One tout was watching the street while the other waved a handful of bills) I recovered my wits and stepped back into the open street. Fortunately, a Barclays Bank was just a block away.

Once armed with Kenyan shillings, within the hour I had found a budget room and was sipping a Tusker on the terrace of the landmark Castle Hotel. Liberated from the chill of Nairobi and Bella—the warm salt air with hints of tropical blossoms had me close to swooning.

In the surrounding tables were a few Kenyans in safari suits but the majority of the clientele were tourists, mostly male, presumably of a host of nationalities. Interspersed among them were working girls. Ranging in hue from light coffee to obsidian black, most were stylishly dressed in western attire.

It was one just two tables over who caught my eye. With a flick of the braided beads (blue and white) dangling on her forehead— she signaled a come hither. Joining me at my table, she introduced herself as Mariam from Uganda. She seemed pleased that I spoke some Swahili. Two beers later, she accompanied me back to my room at the nearby Oceanic Hotel...



For an hour thereafter, we lay under the whirring fan, tingling in a sauna of sensuality. In the musky embrace of slippery skin, I whispered: “*Yeye tamu sanu*” [ this is sweet] and she, in a husky voice, repeated the same.

The heat-drugged moistness combined with sleeplessness left me pleasantly exhausted. It was very sweet, indeed—especially after Arusha and Nairobi. Yet even in snuggling and squeezing her hand, I had no illusions about the nature of our transaction. Still, in slipping the *zawadi* [gift] into her hand, I hesitated in saying ‘*kwaheri*’ [goodbye] after the ‘*asante sana*’ [thanks]. Looking into her soft black eyes, I knew that one taste of that honey would not be enough.

“*Mimi haja ya kulala,*” [I’m sleepy] I said, “*tunaweza kukutana kesho?*”

With a soft smile, she squeezed my hand. Yes, she would see me tomorrow. She suggested we meet at 11:00 AM back on the balcony of the Castle hotel. We could visit Fort Jesus together, just a few blocks away.

I walked her down to the lobby.

“*Mpaka kesho, Saa tanu!*”

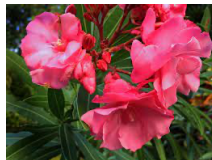
No worries, she promised, she would be there tomorrow at 11:00 AM. She lightly kissed my cheek and with a soft rustling of her braids, stepped into the street.

Heading back to my room, I was stopped by the desk clerk.

"That girl you were with, sir. She’s a thief. Be careful, *kweli!*"

“*Hakuna shida,* [no problem], I smiled, almost certain that he had mistaken her for someone else.

Still, back in the room I checked my money pouch, tucked into the top of my knapsack. She had seen me place it there. Nothing was missing. How even for an instant could I have doubted! Contrite, I lay down under the swooping fan with the faint honking of traffic two floors below. I closed eyes amid lingering traces of coconut oil and musk. Why hadn’t I asked her to stay the night?



I woke suddenly in the dark. Not knowing if night had just fallen or I had slept nearly to dawn, I heard the echoing drip of the shower from the next room. A light from the adjacent shower stall emanated through the latticed partition at the top of the bathroom

wall. I then heard echoing voices—a squeaky female’s and a light male’s voice. Without switching on the bedside light, I checked my luminous watch on the night table. It was only 8:45 PM. I rolled carefully off the bed and crept into the bathroom. I leaned into the dank wall the better to listen:

“Don’t you like water?” said the male in German-accented English.

“*Ndio*,” [yes] said the female voice, “water is our best friend.”

I stepped up carefully up on the toilet to peer through the lattice. From the extreme angle all that was visible on the flooded concrete floor of the adjoining bathroom stall was a black foot and a white leg, with toes wriggling.

Within a few seconds, I dropped back with a shiver of self-disgust. How would I have felt a few hours earlier, about being spied on from the next room? I crept back to bed. Yet with moans echoing from the latticed space between the walls, I could only pull the pillow over my head. At least I was sure that the female voice wasn’t that of ‘Mariam from Uganda’...

I woke again to check the time. It was 1:00 AM and I was drenched in sweat. Needing air, I dressed and headed down to the darkened lobby where the *mlinzi* [watchman] listened to a softly playing radio on the floor behind the desk. Nodding to him, I stepped out into the dimly lit street, wincing in the whiffs of diesel and sewage. Across the street, a young man with hands in pockets, sized me up.

“You looking for friend, mista?”

Approaching from the right corner, a middle-aged woman, wrapped in a *khanga* beckoned. Her face was contorted in the yellowish light. I shook my head and stepped back under the doorway. So that was the ‘exotic’ Mombasa after midnight? Was this the graveyard shift of ‘*walaya*’ [witches] too worn out for the tourist trade and the hour of the *djinn* [spirits] who attended them? Back on the damp mattress still faintly redolent of musky perfume, the glimpse of the Kenyan Satiricon seemed only a nightmare.



The following morning, I arrived at the Castle terrace fifteen minutes early and sat turning the pages of the Kenyan *Daily Nation*. Around 11:10 AM, just as I was getting antsy, Mariam appeared at the doorway. Smiling, she crossed to my table. Wearing her braids under a kerchief and a looser-fitting blouse and dress than yesterday seemed a deliberate signal that she was not on the hustle.

I ordered two Tusker lagers and asked her about her evening. She said she had prepared *chakula* for her friend, Christine, who was sick, and then went to bed early. I took it as her tacit reassurance that she had not been ‘working’.

Still, after a few moments she picked up the *Daily Nation* and flipped to the shipping columns.

“I like to see who’s in port,” she said. She then scanned the exchange rates. She gave a low whistle. “*Kweli*, the German mark is up!”

Were it not for her sweet smile and the tight squeeze of my hand, I might have declined the visit to Fort Jesus. As it was, we walked arm in arm around the fort, stopping a few times for her to pose for my camera. Noting several Nordic-looking tourists also with African girls on their arms was a reminder that I was almost certainly not the first *rafiki mzungu* [white friend] that Mariam had escorted around the ramparts of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese fort...

After a lunch of fried *samaki*, we walked around the old city. On Biashara St., we stopped at a hole-in-the-wall place called the Arabian Perfume Shop, where the white bearded Swahili proprietor gave us sample whiffs. With Mariam helping to translate, I gathered that his alluring scents were blended locally or imported from India and Oman. Along with the standard patchouli, jasmine, sandalwood or rose— were perfumes more exotic than any ever inhaled.

“What were you wearing yesterday?” I whispered to Mariam.

She inhaled a few more of the proffered fragrances. “Like this,” she said, tapping her finger on one of the tiny vials.

The perfume was costly, but I got a ten-gram vial for Mariam and another to take home.

Back in the room at the Oceanic, I massaged her with the oily perfume. The tincture of musky floral attar was ‘*tamu kuliko asali*’—even sweeter than yesterday. Barely a day after the first taste of that honey, I could hardly get enough.



As we passed the reception desk on our way out for the evening, the desk clerk again glared.

“That man bores me!” Mariam said. “He just doesn’t like my people.”

We stopped at a Lebanese café for *shawarma* and *chai*. Then at Mariam's suggestion, we walked further down Moi Ave. to the Sunshine Club. It was plainly a haunt for sailors, punting tourists and working girls.

For at least forty-five minutes we stood arm in arm on the side wall, watching the revelers. She elbowed my attention to a group of lanky Japanese boys in baseball caps dancing together Kung Fu and Robot style. Another Japanese pulled out a pocket calculator and loudly disputed his tab.

"They are so rude to Africans!" Mariam whispered.

When we got a table, we drank our pricey beers slowly. In the din we could hardly talk without shouting in one another's ears. Still, with Mariam caressing my arm amid the boom of music and the disco lights projecting images of Sinbad the Sailor— I was enchanted. When Madonna's *'Holiday'* boomed up, she tugged me on onto the dance floor.

"But I never dance," I said, "*Kweli*, I don't know how!"

Ignoring my protests, she guided me to the midst of the whirling coloured lights. Amid the gauzy blur, she held my eyes. In that rare unselfconscious moment amid a cluster of bouncing bodies, I might well have been like Sinbad— under a Circean spell...



The next morning, to avoid further tension at the Oceanic reception desk, I checked out early. When Mariam left for her place, I got another room at the slightly more expensive New Carlton on Jundari Meru Road. Mariam rejoined me later in the afternoon on the terrace of the Castle Hotel. She said she had been helping the same friend, Christine, whom she now revealed was recovering from childbirth.

In preparation for a quiet evening together in the hotel room, I bought beer and snacks. I also stopped by a chemist's to pick up prophylactics and a few toiletries requested by Mariam: Omo detergent, scented Vaseline and sanitary napkins. There was an odd tenderness in bringing her such intimate items...

"You don't have to spend money staying here," said Mariam as we started out for breakfast, "Come stay at my place."

"*Hakuna shida?*"

“*Hakuna, cabesa!*”

Assured that there was absolutely no problem, I checked out of the New Carleton and we hailed a taxi that took us away from downtown, along Mombasa Rd. and into the industrial area on the fringes of the port.

We pulled up to a dirty-cement low rise with cannibalized wrecks and car parts cluttered about the entrance. Gingerly, I followed Mariam under a rusty sign lettered: ‘*Venus Metal Shop.*’ Inside, an Indian foreman stood with hands in pockets behind African labourers. As we entered the stairwell at the side, they paused to glower at the *mzungu* amid showering sparks of acetylene. Up a flight of creaky stairs, Mariam pushed a landing door opening to a flat open rooftop. In the design of a Muslim family compound, there were several doors circling an inner courtyard.

Mariam opened the padlock to her room, and I swung my backpack inside. She switched on the lamp illuminating in soft blue her single bed enclosed in a mosquito net.

Waiting for Mariam to return from the common *choo*, I lifted the net and sat on the bed. On the left was an open closet. Piled at the bottom were several pairs of shoes including high heels and cowgirl boots. Squeezed to the other side of the room was a mirrored dresser. On the wall behind was a framed photo of an American destroyer with a tiny photo of a black sailor pinned to the corner. How many other guests, I wondered, have been hosted herein?

### 3



In the following days at Mariam’s room above the Venus Metal Shop, I learned something of the Mombasa from which she managed to snatch a few pleasures amid the harsh transactions for survival:

The identity card she showed stated her birthplace as Mbale, Uganda, and date of birth as October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1964. She said she belonged to the Bagisu tribe that dominates in the Mount Elgon region of eastern Uganda.

I asked what she remembered about Idi Amin, whose despotic rule encompassed her girlhood. She told of hearing warnings of how the dictator’s henchmen drove lorries round the streets of Kampala, announcing a “free meal” to all who would scramble on board. When a lorry was jammed with beggars and cripples, it would be driven to the

shores of Lake Victoria where the human cargo would be machine-gunned by waiting thugs. Afterwards, the load of gore was dumped into the lake to be devoured by crocodiles...

More jarring than this story, was Mariam's conclusion: "Those beggars didn't want to use a *djembe* [hoe] in their villages," she tsked. "They preferred to come to Kampala to beg. That man was harsh— but sometimes he knew what he was doing, *kweli*!"

During the 1979 Tanzanian invasion that overthrew Idi Amin, she was in her early teens. In that time of turmoil, she helped her mother at a petty trading stall in the Mbale market. She said she finished Standard Seven— but secondary school was not even an option for most villagers in those uncertain times— especially not for girls.

Meanwhile, growing up near the Kenyan border, Mariam came to know Mombasa as the source of the goods that lorries brought to Uganda. With bleak prospects at home, at the age of sixteen she set out for the fabled port city.

I did not ask for details about how she fell into her work here. It is not difficult to understand that she would want more than *chakula* and a sleeping mat— the lot of many unmarried girls without much education. As a pretty girl far away from her home village—what could be more alluring than plying the Mombasa tourist trade?

Still, Mariam had no illusions about the risks. Working independently, she had to be wary of extortions and bad customers. She spoke of the hostility of locals (I was reminded of the desk clerk at the Oceanic) and her fear of cops. As a Ugandan she was constantly under the threat of deportation.

She said she didn't expect to stay in Mombasa for longer than two years. She hoped by then to have enough money to set up a little shop back in Uganda. That was her 'dream'— but she also had nightmares:

"I have too many *jinamezi* [bad dreams] and I feel weak," she said as we lay together talking, "*Yellah*, I think some of the other girls are making *ju-ju* against me!"

Her greatest worry was not dying young but that her body would not be sent back home for burial. On the cover of the Marden ruled school exercise book on her dresser she had her home address written in neat letters (*Mariam Kitutu, Box 440 Mbale, Uganda*). That open display gave her consolation she could be quickly identified.

Most wrenching though, was the photo she showed of a little boy, light-skinned with straight black hair. Was said it was her 3-year-old son, Chris, who was staying with her mother in Uganda. I assumed that the father was a tourist with whom she had no further contact.

"Two weeks after I had Chris," she said, "I had to go straight back to work. *Unaelewa*, [you understand] I also needed money to take him home to Uganda. I took some

medicine to stop the bleeding quickly. I also had to take medicine to stop my son from feeding. *Unaona* [you see] how it damaged my breasts?”

Even in the hug of comfort, I glanced towards her dresser where among the scattered toiletries, her weekly memo pad lay open (*Sonntag, Montag, Dienstag...*) She said that it was a gift of the Swiss tourist who spent his vacation with her just a few months previously.

Was she this open with him? With about the American sailor? How many others before them shared her bed? Still, how disarming Mariam is in her honesty! I held her tighter.



I found out that this cluster of rooms above the Venus Metal Shop was owned by a Kenyan ex-seaman. He lived in the room on the opposite side of the courtyard from Mariam. The patio in front of his door was lushly bedecked with planters—one of which was a converted throne toilet. Mariam introduced me to her landlord when he was sitting on the patio with a couple of friends smoking *ganja*.

“Welcome to Mombasa, mahn!” he grinned with a shake of his dreadlocks.

He was surprised that I spoke some Swahili and was even friendlier when I told him I was from Canada. He said he had once been in the port of Vancouver and remembered “hot ladies”. We chatted with him for a few minutes (I declined a proffered toke) and left relieved. At least for the moment, he doesn’t seem to mind one of his renters hosting a “*rafiki*” [friend].



I also met a few of the other girls who rent the Kenyan Rasta’s rooms. The first to whom Mariam introduced me was her Ugandan friend, Christine. She was plumper and darker in complexion than Mariam and apparently spoke some German. Mariam said that Christine left her month-old babe with an old Swahili woman when she went out trolling.

Farida, a coffee-skinned Somali girl who lived next door, was another friend of Mariam's. Then there was Catharine—a little older, thinner and somewhat shy than the others. Mariam did not introduce me to any of the Kenyan girls who rented here.

Sitting outside with Mariam near the common cooking area one afternoon, I saw some of the girls preening at the mirror above the sink. Whether in plain dress or tight jeans, they stopped to check their makeup before heading down the stairwell.

I observed that the girls come and go. I did not see any other 'friends' brought by the girls to these rooms. It seemed that I was one of the rare exceptions. Most *watalii* tourists], I gathered, were entertained in hotel rooms.

According to Mariam, the girls who wore heavier make-up, beaded braids and jeans pursued the tourist trade. Like her, they softened their skin with scented Vaseline moisturizer and lightened it with toning crème or even with bleach-added laundry soap. Those who worked the local market never wore lipstick or tight jeans. They often wore straight-haired wigs.

"African men don't like plaited hair," Mariam explained, "and they don't like to see women wearing trousers."

She said those wearers of straight-hair wigs also tended to be older and less confident in *wazungu* [European languages].

"Some of these girls don't learn any English at all!" said Mariam with a hint of scorn.

Of course, for the younger and prettier, very little fluency was required—certainly not for the short-time transactions.

We also sat with some of the girls as they plaited one another's hair in the shaded common area. A few crouched around the kerosene cooker, singing softly as they stirred. Relaxed in *khangas*, the girls who worked the bars in western attire looked like typical African villagers...

Along with the others, Mariam enjoyed chewing *khat*, especially when wedged in a wad of bubble gum. She urged me to try but I felt nothing more than a sore jaw. Meanwhile, she and Christine, mouths working rhythmically, closed their eyes in twitching calm...

Whether or not the other renters minded my presence—I felt no chilliness...



On this third morning above the Venus Metal Shop, I was comfortable enough to wait in Mariam's room alone, while she went down to the port to meet with a Ugandan lorry driver. She said she was helping him by selling to the girls some dresses he'd pinched from his cargo:

"Do you get a commission?" I asked.

"Why should I?" she looked round from tying her kerchief.

In my silence, she went on: "Maybe it's not the same with you white people but we Ugandans always help each other." She tsked. "Maybe he can help me when I take my things back to Uganda. You know these drivers can get things through customs without paying."

Like a partner departing for work, she kissed my cheek.

Soon after she left, I was looking through a raft of tourist pamphlets when I heard a commotion outside. That was followed by a double rap on the door and a loud whisper:

*"Kunyamaza! Polisi!"*

A police swoop! Doors slammed in the cry of warning. Switching the light off, I pressed against the closed door. How in hell would I explain my presence here? For heart thudding minutes, I heard the voice of the Rasta landlord, talking with the cops. Then after a thud of boots down the stairs, there was quiet.

When Mariam came back, I was shaking.

"*Wallah*, these police ask for our entry permits. They ask for our clinic cards. All they are looking for is *hongo*—money from the girls." She chuckled. "Don't worry, F.—they're not coming for you!" She squeezed my hand. "Let's get some beer."



Later in the afternoon on the terrace of the Manor Hotel, Mariam was on her third beer, while I (dyspeptic from too much drinking of late) was sipping ginger ale. Suddenly the sky darkened and whirlwinds of dust were blowing in the street. Amid the tropical downpour that followed we watched passersby running for cover. Then without warning a black bird flew from the squall into the terrace. As it fluttered wildly around our heads, Mariam threw up her arms.

"I know birds—that's a bad one!"

Within a few fraught seconds, the bird wheeled back out into the rain. Staring after it, Mariam's eyes flashed with anger. "Those Kenyan girls— they're jealous of me!"

We sat gloomily until the rain subsided and then caught a taxi back to the Venus Metal Shop. We were exiting at the same time as another girl was walking up to the entrance. Miriam muttered that she was Doreen, a Kikuyu, who had recently moved into the room beside the *choo* [toilet].

I stood back as Mariam pointed her finger. Doreen turned around with hands on hips scornfully pointing her chin. Both girls hurled Swahili insults ('*Mkundu*' [asshole] was repeated). With an obscene hand gesture, Doreen turned her back and clipped up the stairs.

Mariam stared after her, seething. "*Fala*," [idiot] she growled, "wicked bitch!"

Upstairs, Mariam told me that all the non-Kenyan girls were suspicious that the cops who came in the morning had been acting on a tip-off. They thought Doreen was jealous of their success with the *wazungu* trade. They believed that she had been seeing a *n'anga* [witchdoctor] and attempting to use *dawa* [medicine] against them.

I stood at Mariam's door while she called Catharine and Farida from the common area. With fingers pointing back at a sneering Doreen, the girls knocked on the door of the Rasta landlord. He came out frowning, holding up his hands in referee stance. As the girls continue jabbering and pointing fingers—ignoring his entreaties to stay cool— he suddenly thundered:

"*Nisikilize*, [listen] I won't have *ju-ju* in my house—*hakuna cabesa*!"

Mariam apologized for the disturbance but later in the room she was smiling.

"She won't try dirty tricks again— *kwa hakika*!" For the non-Kenyan girls— it was a small victory.



The next evening, Mariam had visitors.

Just after dusk, we heard whispering outside the door followed by a tentative knock. When Mariam opened the door, three younger African men stepped back awkwardly. I stood beside her in the open doorway as she exchanged a few words with the one hanging

to the rear. He was tall and so skinny that the end of his belt was dangling. With unusual gentleness, Miriam bade me wait in the room while she went outside to talk with the guys.

After pacing in the blue light for nearly fifteen minutes, I walked out to the common area near the *choo*. In seeing Mariam talking *tête-à-tête* in the dark, there came a trill of alarm.

"F.," she said, "what are you worried about? Come here."

As I stepped forward, the skinny fellow jumped away as if startled. With a quick *kwaheri* he clomped away down the stairs. I grasped her elbow.

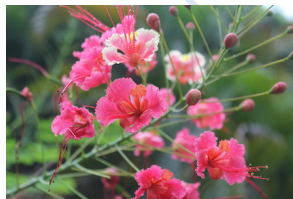
"Who was that guy?"

"He's Farida's boyfriend. You know in African custom we need someone to act as a go-between."

"He's not *your* boyfriend?"

She gave her husky laugh. "You're jealous! He's nobody to me, F."

"*Nakuamini*," [I believe you] I said, in a thud of desolate tenderness.



A half hour later, I went back to the room to write in my notebook while Mariam washed a few clothes in the dim light by the common sink. When I came back out to the common area, she was no longer at the sink. Had she gone out to meet someone? Then I heard the trickling of water and Mariam's husky voice through the dark.

"Are you there, F.? Me and Farida are getting ready to take a shower together."

As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I saw her moving silhouette before the shower cubicle.

"Come," she said.

Unwrapping her *khanga* with one hand she pulled me gently with the other.

Under the dribbling showerhead, a naked Farida in silhouette was already laving herself.

I stood shyly just outside the splash. Crouching between Farida and I, Mariam kneaded her bar in both hands before vigorously soaping her face.

*“Unafikiri anayo matako mazuri?”* she blubbered under the spray.

Back turned to us, Farida giggled.

Mariam then repeated in English: *“Kweli, Farida—don’t you think F. has a nice ass?”*

She then pushed the bar of soap into my hand. *“Wash my back, OK?”*

With dripping sleeve, I scrubbed. Perhaps she was showing her friend just how comfortable we were together. As for her remark? I took it as a small compliment—possibly even sincere...



Later as we lay in the sweaty dark under the mosquito net, Mariam told me more about the birth of her son, Chris, in the Mombasa general hospital three years before. She said that the baby was a month premature and she needed a blood transfusion. She said she was drugged but still clearly remembers strange details about the Arab woman in labour in the same ward:

*“Her baby’s head started coming out of the back. They had to give oxygen and force it back in... You don’t believe that? Yallah, it’s true! That happens a lot with Arabs. It’s because they screw too much from behind. These Swahilis, too—they like that better than anything else!”*

In the middle of the night, we woke to the bleating of car horns and angry voices outside.

*“What’s going on?”*

*“They’re drunk,”* she whispered. *“They’re trying to get in to see one of the girls. They’re speaking Kikuyu. Don’t worry, the front door’s locked.”*

Even as we clung together, I could not help wondering how soon after my departure Miriam would be available for nocturnal visits...

## 4



The next morning, I asked Mariam if she's like to accompany me on a short getaway to Malindi. Down to my last few days, I would like to see a little more of Kenya than the Mombasa bars and the rooftop of the Venus Metal Works. I proposed that we could even journey up the coast to Lamu.

"I see enough of these Swahilis," she said. "You go alone, F. I'll be here when you come back."

I realized, of course, that she was wary of police and passport checks. When I told her I would be gone for just a couple of nights, she suggested I leave some of my things in her room. In her encouragement of my plan, I couldn't help wonder what business she was eager to attend to in my absence.

In the afternoon, in a welcome break from the usual routine of beer on the terrace of the Castle, she assented to a jaunt out to Diani Beach. Her plainer print dress seemed selected for not drawing attention to herself. We took a bus and a ferry from Likoni on the southern outskirts of the city.

At Diani, she sat at a beach restaurant table while I went in for a swim. After lunch we took a long walk along the shore. When I stopped to take pictures, she struck wistful poses, quite in contrast to her saucy smiles for the camera at Fort Jesus the day after we met. I was not sure whether she was nervous of running into someone she knew or just tired of being taken as another *malaya* hooked up with a tourist through the length of his vacation.



The next morning, I packed my shoulder bag for the trip to Malindi. Before I left to catch a *matatu*, Mariam told me about a dream that woke her in the middle of the night:

“I was in Uganda with my mother at the government *duka* [shop], selling coffee from our *shamba*. The man at the scales laughed and threw a few shillings at our feet. We worked so hard and got almost nothing. It was so painful. My mother was crying. *Kweli*, why am I always dreaming of getting cheated?”

She shook her head and sighed.



The *matatu* over the bumpy unsealed road north to Malindi took a little over three hours.

I took a cheap room in the old town and walked down to the beach. First, I paid homage to Vasco da Gama’s eroding coral pillar perched on its slippery coral promontory. Most remarkable was that a structure that looked so unstable could have endured for nearly five hundred years. Scored with graffiti and reeking of urine, the pitted brown pillar dominates a beach scene that the ancient Italian mariner could not have remotely imagined:

Behind the strip of white sand were the elaborate gates of four-star resorts flying a host of foreign flags. In front of the gates amid clusters of swaying coconut palms, middle-aged European tourists sat under thatch umbrellas. Others strolled along the shoreline arm in arm with young Africans. There were as many middle-aged European women with young men as there were grey-headed white men with girls. If a bewildered Vasco da Gama, roused momentarily from eternal sleep would guess this to be a strange new form of slavery, he would be almost correct...

For nearly an hour, I strode along the windy beachfront. I had hoped to find a less touristy stretch, but it was continuous private resort and half-naked white bodies. Yet how could I be so bloody hypocritical? As if my style of tourism was any more defensible than theirs!

Gloomily, I circled back to the old town and my baking concrete room. Under the mosquito net I tossed through a sweaty night. Several times I reached over to feel the emptiness...



Well before the light of morning, I knew that no exotic impression in Lamu was worth missing another night with Mariam. After *chai* and *mandazi* at a hole in the wall café, I walked back to the very spot in the dusty town center where the *matatu* dropped me off the day before.

By early afternoon, I was back in downtown Mombasa in the midst of a pelting rainstorm. After taxiing to Wajir St., I rapped on the corrugated door at the top of the stairs above the Venus Metal Shop.

One of the Kenyan girls opened. She stood sullenly aside as I rushed in. After just thirty-six hours absence, I was knocking on Mariam's door.

There was a breathless silence before the husky call of "*Hodi!*" [come in] from within. Mariam opened with a warm smile and leaned into my embrace.

"I missed you."

"*Kweli*, F., I missed you too."

Although she was wearing loose pants and silver earrings I had not seen before, on her wrist was the digital watch I had given her.

"I was just going out to the market for some *mboga* [vegetables]," she said.

Squeezed together under an umbrella, we went out into the light rain to buy the *mboga*, along with snacks and beer.

By early evening we were back lying on her bed, in the dim blue light, reading different sections of the *Daily Nation* and sipping Tusker. Mariam had the classifieds and was checking the shipping columns.

"The Greeks are in port. They are cheap bastards— those Greeks!" In emphasis, she flipped a bottle cap across the floor.

Just as I suppressed a twinge of annoyance, there suddenly came a sting in the groin. In alarm, I twisted around and sat on the bed with my back to her. The worst was confirmed.

"F., what are you doing?"

"I'm just checking," I said, unable to hide a growing panic.

"Checking what?" she said softly.

"Can't you guess?" In a swell of bitterness, I glared at her. "I need to see a doctor. We *both* need to."

She immediately understood. "I've been with no one else but you." She shook her head. "More than a week."

"What of the last two days?"

"What of it? Did you have somebody in Malindi?"

"*Kabisa si!* [absolutely not] What about you?"

"I told you. You don't believe what I say?"

"What about that guy who came up here last week? You told me you didn't have a local boyfriend!"

Her eyes flashed. "What are you saying? Do you think Africans are the only ones who can get that?"

"No, no, no— I didn't mean that."

As she began to sob, I reached for her. She flinched away.

I took a deep breath. "Look, it doesn't matter now where you got it. We need to rid of it, *sasa hivi* [immediately]."

Later, I lay awake in the dark, wincing. At one point when Mariam draped an arm over me. I turned away.

"You think I'm dirty? OK, turn from me."

"No, no. It's just the stinging." I checked my wristwatch on the floor. "Wish I'd known earlier. Now we'll have to wait to tomorrow. First thing in the morning."

She sighed and stiffened against my clumsy caress. "Stop touching me!" she muttered rolling to the far end of the bed.



Both of us woke in pre-dawn. For several minutes, Mariam sighed and tsked in the dark before turning on the blue lamp. Crawling back into bed, she dabbed her eyes and sniffled. Almost spontaneously, we hugged.

“Catherine has the same sickness two weeks ago,” she said softly, squeezing my hand. “She can tell us where to go for treatment.”

By 8:30 AM, we were at the door of a Sikh missionary clinic near the port. Being first through the door, we were led almost immediately into the examining room. The turbaned doctor who attended us was soft-spoken and efficient.

I went first in presenting my arm for the veterinarian-sized hypo injection. No sooner was the needle withdrawn, when I began sweating and hyperventilating. A look of horror passed between Mariam and the doctor. Was a *mzungu* about to drop dead before their eyes?

“F.?”

I crouched down gasping. Mariam touched my arm, as the palpitations mercifully abated.

“Is this the first time you’ve had a reaction to penicillin?” said the doctor taking my wrist to check the pulse.

“Yeah,” I faltered. “But I think I’m OK now.”

“Just sit down for a few minutes,” he said, nodding to the chair.

Mariam then nonchalantly held her arm up. It was obviously not her first time. Before we departed (each with an envelope of tetracycline capsules to take over seven days), the Sikh doctor took Mariam aside.

“You’d better come back later for blood tests,” he said sharply. “You could have something else you don’t know about— something more serious. We are doing a survey. You need to come back. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

Still shaken, I walked out into the steamy air leaning on Mariam’s arm. For a moment, it felt almost like we were a couple struggling through a crisis together. That was until halfway down the block where Mariam was hailed by an Asian fellow coming up from the docks. He crossed the street to greet us. He shook my hand and then smiled to Mariam before continuing on his way. Mariam said he was a Malaysian merchant sailor whose ship had been stuck in Mombasa for months.

“Ahmad’s ship is impounded until the harbour fees are paid,” she said. “He’s a good man— very kind.”

I did ask for details of his kindness.



In the evening— my last in Mombasa— I sat on her spread *khanga* in the corner of the common area while she stirred the bubbling cauldron on the brazier. Before my departure she wanted me to taste *mboga ndizi*, a special Ugandan banana stew.

All the while we have stayed together, it seems she has more gradually slipped into her more traditional habits—while sensing that I am at ease with them. Tonight, it seemed, she was completely herself...

Later we showered together and for the last time I massaged her with the Arabian perfume. Every contour of her body seemed achingly familiar. Under the mosquito net through the last heat-drugged malarial night we clung together.

As the final hours became minutes, the bitter-sweetness sharpened...



I woke at 6:00 AM and packed my things. Mariam sat on the bed watching.

“So, what presents will you leave me?” she said softly.

“Do you think I can ignore the *zaiwadi* [gift] you gave me?”

In a jolt of anger, I picked up the watch and held it over my open shoulder bag in a momentary gesture of taking it back. Then the shock in her eyes struck me to the core.

“I didn’t mean that, *kweli cabesa!*” I cried, dropping it into her lap.

As I reached towards her, she jerked away and sprang out the door— slamming it.

I continued to pack—still stung with shame for my heartless gesture. Perhaps I was desperate to lessen the building anguish.

After a few moments, Mariam came back but sat on the far side of the bed, staring at the floor. With my straps all fastened, I crouched on the floor, also staring glumly. Then with a sigh, I gingerly sat beside her on the bed. She did not move away.

“I don’t have a girlfriend in Zimbabwe,” I muttered. “Honestly, Mariam, I want to see you again. I’ll be on vacation again in July. I can come back to Mombasa. If you have a passport, you could even visit me. I could send you a ticket.”

“OK, OK,” she blew her nose and wiped away tears.

“I have this address. I’ll write.”

Holding her for the last time, I still glanced over at the daily planner on her dresser and then up to the snapshot of the sailor pinned to the corner of the US destroyer. Perhaps they, too, promised to write...

It was raining as we made our way to the *matatu* stop. She held her *khanga* over her head. When I stuffed money into her hand (“for *chakula*”) she never even looked to see what denomination it was.

The end came with a kiss on her cheek and a squeeze of her arm before I stumbled into the bus. The change-clinking conductor slapped the side and we lurched away. Falling into the metal seat, I looked outside. She had already disappeared into the rain...

Passing under the elephant tusk archway, across the bridge and off Mombasa Island—I kept arm folded over my chest. It felt like I was covering a hole where flesh had been torn away. What chance, really was there of seeing her again? In that instant, there came the gut-piercing apprehension of final separation as the very closest that the living can ever come to experiencing death...



While I was waiting in the airport, the Sultan of Oman was just arriving on an official visit. The forefathers of Sultan Qaboos had once ruled the east African littoral and spawned the Swahili culture.

Through the window of the departure lounge, I looked dolefully out onto the rainy tarmac. An honour guard of white turbaned and red-sashed Swahilis bore beach-sized yellow umbrellas to shelter the entourage once they stepped off the royal plane. Staring through the rain-plashed window at the glistening red carpet I could faintly hear the bleat

of ceremonial rams' horns. Yet at the climactic moment of the royal appearance in the hatchway, I turned away. Amid this rare juxtaposition of history, all I could think of was the last glimpse of Mariam— with *khanga* drawn up like a Muslim *abaya* over her head...

On the flight back to Nairobi, more pearls were cast before me:

My seatmate was a director of a visiting Indian charitable organization. Dressed in a spotless white caftan, he was diminutive and bald with a *bindi* third eye smudged in yellow saffron above the bridge of his nose. After an initial reticence, we chatted about politics.

"You know, much evil in the world spills out from bloated egos," he said, with a stroke of his wispy white beard. "If those politicians with their huge egos could just sit down and only for a minute talk about *what* is right rather than *who* is right—then the world could be a better place."

As the old man folded delicate hands on his lap and lapsed into silence, I thought again of Mariam staring at her blue-lit ceiling. How long before she was back on the terrace of the Castle— back searching for the telltale *mzungu* eyes with deeper forms of longing?

Blinking in the anguish of that image, I stared out the porthole. The dark green of the coast had given way to tawny savanna. In anticipation of the cool and arid uplands, the very skin seemed to tighten. Before we started the descent into Nairobi, I was already bracing for the return to work.



\*\*\*\*\*

### ***Afterword:***

*I wrote Mariam as soon as I got back to Zimbabwe. She replied within a week. Along with her note was a black and white studio photo. In it, she was standing beside a flower stand draped with a cloth emblazoned 'Mombasa.' Her unbraided hair, baggy dress and somber expression seemed to suggest, she was no longer plying the tourist trade. Back into work routines, I put off a reply.*

*Several weeks later, I began seeing the beautiful young Zimbabwean to whom I would soon become engaged. I wrote nearly everyone in my address book with the glad tidings—including Mariam. Obviously, she did not write back.*

*As for Bella K.: I did not contact her again but certainly could not forget her.*

*In the early 1990s, passing through Montreal, I briefly visited Gerard M., my former colleague in Tanzania. I asked his wife, Fortunata, if she'd heard any news of Bella:*

*"No," Fortunata said—but then added gravely: "She's from Kagera, you know, on Lake Victoria. My family in Rwanda tells me that too many people from there are coming down with this 'slim disease.' What do you think?"*

*In Google searches for any hint of Bella's fate, I have come up with her possible relatives but no one of her age. As for my shabby treatment of her in April 1984: I can only apologize in apostrophe. Was she spared from the plague that ravaged so much of Africa? Perhaps she even made it overseas to study, after all. I could only hope that Bella got the break she deserved...*

*What of Mariam's fate? I would love to think that she made it back to Uganda and prospered there. Yet seared into memory are the words of the Sikh doctor in the Mombasa clinic: "You could have something else you don't know about," he said to Mariam. "Something much more serious..."*

*It would hardly be possible to think of anyone more exposed to HIV than Mariam was in 1984. As for everyone—both African and 'wageni'—who unwittingly played Russian Roulette in those days—many of us were just lucky...*

*I am not a believer in miracles but that lifelong disposition was recently challenged:*

*A few months ago, an idle Google search led me to a website of an international NGO specializing in micro-loans to women's enterprises in Africa. Among the groups funded for a loan in 2010, was a hair-dresser's coop in Mbale, Uganda. In the midst of the photo of nine smiling Ugandan women of various ages was the group leader described as following:*

*'...Mariam K. is married with three children, one going to school. She carries out salon services and she has been in her business for over four years...'*

*I was stunned. The description did not seem to fit a woman who had worked the tourist trade in Mombasa 25 years earlier, but the name and home city were identical! I tried to match the face of the leader of the hairdressers' coop in 2010 with my scanned photo of the twenty-two-year-old old Mariam at Fort Jesus in April 1984. Unfortunately, the woman in the coop photo (who could have been any age between thirty and fifty) was too grainy to blow up.*

*At the same time, I recalled that official names and birthdates in Africa can be flexible, depending on the need. The leader of the hairdresser coop in Mbale could have been Mariam's relative—or anyone from her home area using an old identity card. Still, had Mariam not said that her dream was to set up her own shop back in her hometown?*

*Even in recognizing that the leader of the hairdressing coop might be another Mariam, I was deeply moved. A mere \$2500 loan was helping a group of African women make a decent living in their own community. The success of their fledgling enterprise might well determine whether or not their sons and daughters would be drawn to Kampala, Nairobi or Mombasa...*

*I sensed a duty to support that effort—at least with a donation. Given this history, no potential reader can doubt why.*

*-1984, 2016*