

Help You? As Who?

Elvis Ondieki

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Book number **001** in the **I Came, I Saw, I Asked for a Chainsaw** series.

Dedication

To my sons, Chris and Clive.

CHAPTER ONE



My wallet fell off a bus window not too long ago. Whenever I think of it, I reckon that it fell down a rabbit hole more than it did land on the stained, weather-beaten tarmac.

Inside the brown leather wallet, there were many possessions. Among them was my national ID, my ATM card, not to mention cash — 5,260 shillings to be exact. In it, there were also loyalty cards from two supermarkets. Each had about 300 points, tediously accumulated. There were also three passport photos of mine.

Perhaps the most important item in there was a receipt that was proof of payment for a tooth extraction procedure. It was all I needed to chuck out a source of searing pain that dentists had identified as tooth number 14.

How did the wallet drop? I was on the back-right seat; the side of the driver, if you may. I had taken it out to get my fare. The conductor was four or five rows away, and it wouldn't be long before he reached me.

The music was loud. You would think lightning had lent its speakers to this city bus.

As the speakers boomed, I don't know what confusion caused me to loosen my grip on the wallet against the open window. I always open windows by my side because I like my air fresh.

The wallet dropped in a split-second as the bus hit a bump. I think the driver might have seen it fly out through his side mirror, but perhaps he didn't. They were known to engage in phone conversations or even exchange text messages as they drove. When not on the phone, they were revving up the volume of the music in the passengers' cabin to the highest possible decibel. So, I would not be surprised if he did not notice it.

"Ask the driver to stop the bus! I have dropped my wallet!" I shouted at the conductor as I sprang up on my feet.

Though my voice was a pint in the ocean of booming music, a number of faces in the bus all of a sudden turned in my direction.

The conductor noticed me but did not make head or tail of what I was saying due to the blaring music. At that juncture, a dancehall song, which I knew by the beat and not by the title of the song, was pounding the passengers' eardrums. The yellow-and-grey bus, a relatively new one with decorations on every last inch of its body, was moving at the speed of an outlaw's car being pursued by a police car on an open road.

"Please let me alight here. I have dropped my wallet, and it had all my money," I shouted as I made for the door.

The man nearest to me at that point joined in my frenzied communication, attempting to show the conductor the urgency of the matter.

"So, you are alighting without paying me?" he shouted back, not in the least moved by my trepidation.

"Give me your number. I will send you the fare on mobile money," I belated.

"We know those tricks. It's an old and sick ploy that people have used to get free rides. Not today, genius," the conductor barked.

I was anxious at first. Now I was getting both anxious and angry. It is the sort of mix that makes people throw punches involuntarily. A voice told me to get hold of his faded shirt and rip it up into pieces, or to shave his unkempt tufts of hair with just my sweaty palms. I felt like landing a fist on his lips that were suspending a toothpick from a bushy mouth.

"Do you realise that I am now too far from the spot where the wallet dropped? Don't you want me to recover it?"

"Just give me my money first. Seventy bob."

"Why do you act as if you have never lost anything?" a passenger who was the nearest to us shot at the conductor. She then fished a 100-shilling note and pushed it into the conductor's bushy face, targeting particularly the nose.

"Take the 70 and use the extra 30 to further enrich your multi-billion empire, you shrewd businessman. I will shortly look out for your forest of a face in the list of the richest people and see how far you have climbed," she said.

The conductor didn't answer her.

"You are the type that throws people out of moving buses for falling short on the fare," she further charged.

Perhaps stung by the angered passenger's words or just being plain indifferent, the conductor headed to the door to signal the driver to stop. As was typical of the city's buses, the driver was in another cabin, separated from the passengers' as an anti-mugging feature.

As the bus decelerated, I looked briefly at the lady and thanked her by bringing my palms together. I was too miffed to say anything coherent. She signalled back as I dashed for the door, my heart beating faster than the bass from the dancehall song playing.

Whenever a person alights from a particularly loud *matatu*, they feel like they have been delivered to a new planet. That was my exact feeling as I stepped out of the bus, even as my mind raced while thinking of the fastest way to get to the spot where the wallet dropped.

I had alighted at least two kilometres away from that spot. Being a busy city road, I knew a lot had happened during the time the conductor was playing Pharaoh.

My initial hunch was to think myself a fool for hoping that I would return to the spot where the wallet dropped and somehow get someone waiting for me with it. I knew I was placing too much hope on the dwellers of the

man-eat-man city we lived in. They call it the capital city that belongs to the crafty.

Despite my reservations, I chose to head to that spot to, if not for anything, confirm my fears that no one in their right mind would pick up a loaded wallet and stand there waiting for the owner to arrive.

I had finished my shift at the Sollglitter Restaurant at 4pm that Friday. I was a waiter there. April 21 was the date. This was to be a routine trip back home after a day of being on my feet longer than a tree. Now it was becoming anything but routine.

The thought of losing all the money I had to push me till the end of the month was paralysing. My other concern was the receipt. My tooth had been a nightmare for months, defying almost every intervention thrown at it. That Saturday, it was going to be pulled out and it would be good riddance.

Then this.

The evening sun was delivering its vote of thanks. In a short while, it would be fading out in the west. Stadium Road was bustling with city residents chasing an income. There was the well-built banana seller pushing his invitingly yellow goodness on a wheelbarrow. There were sellers of roast maize who had taken prime positions where pedestrians were sure to help themselves to the ever-popular chewable.

The aroma of fish being fried in the hope of joining the supper tables later in the evening was the prevailing smell at the spot where I alighted. Bags of *omena* on sale added a certain timbre to that fish smell. The specific point on Stadium Road where my wallet dropped was called Kwa Chifu. Passengers often asked to be dropped off at Kwa Chifu (the Chief's Place), and every conductor knew where that was despite the fact that there was no signage anywhere indicating the name. It was a market and a bus stop that was a major connection point to various other suburbs of the city.

As I ran breathlessly towards the Kwa Chifu stage, my lungs were doing a week's job every minute. This was a dual carriageway and so there was no way I could get a *matatu* moving in the opposite direction and hop in. I

had to use the proper lane, which would consume a lot of time crossing and getting a bus that moved as fast as I wished.

Had I the money, I would have paid one of the eager motorcyclists who kept signalling at me by the road to rush me to point zero. They were known for their defiance of traffic rules but they were made for moments like this, I thought to myself.

No one ever died from seeking a favour, I said to myself, and so I decided to ask one rider to help.

"Please take me to the Kwa Chifu stage," I exhaled as I pointed at the conspicuous building in the vicinity.

I was panting and wiping sweat from one ear to the other via the forehead.

"I dropped my wallet there. I do not have any money on me now, but I will take your mobile number and send it to you later. That is if you accept 100 shillings for the task," I pleaded, shaking my shirt at the collar to let in fresh air into my chest.

The rider, who was initially raring to go, believing he was securing yet another customer, suddenly killed the engine of his motorbike. He looked at me from toe to head, training his bloodshot eyes first on my black shoes then on my navy-blue khaki trousers, my white shirt — which was the dress code at my workplace — and then my face. I am quite tall, and so it took an awkwardly long moment. It looked like a day and a minute before he was done inspecting me.

When his face finally met mine after that brief inspection, I needed no verbal answer. I must have looked suspicious to him. Just like the bus conductor, he must have thought I was a con using a badly constructed script.

Humiliated but trying hard not to show it, I ran on, having decided to put my unfit feet to task. The "undressing" by the rider, his smirk, and his utter emotionlessness made me feel like the most rotten piece of garbage in a bin.

I was not running as fast as I would have wished, and that is why I decided to terminate my laboured run to approach a woman who was coming from the opposite direction. She must have come there to buy food.

"Excuse me, madam," I said, breathing heavily.

I saw her right hand clasp tightly at her handbag as she stopped to listen to me. Stopping her was my first win, I thought.

"I dropped my wallet over there at Kwa Chifu as we moved this way, heading home. I'm running because no motorcycle can take me there without cash. Could you please spare 100 shillings to enable me to get a ride there? It's not that far, but time is of the essence, you know," I haggled.

She didn't look moved.

"Do you know you are the fourth person stopping me to ask me for fare today due to one inconvenience or another?" she asked.

Looking at herself dramatically, she then remarked, "What have I worn today that makes strangers think that they can get free money from me? Did I accidentally dress like a politician?"

"Trust me, madam. This is an absolute emergency," I pleaded.

"Looks like today is not that day," she said, pouting her lips.

"Okay. Thank you for giving me an audience, regardless," I told her as I relaunched my run. I could feel rivulets of sweat forming a river down my spine.

As I ran, I remembered the advice I had heard friends give each other during a casual chat. It was that while in the city, you should never be persuaded to give money to a stranger because you may buy into their piteous story, and then as you take out your wallet or purse to hand them the money, they snatch it and run away. It is an advisory I had personally followed a couple of times, turning down most requests for money. That is the reason I did not feel entirely disappointed when the lady, in her checked dress, white flat-sole shoes and a black-and-white purse, refused to come to my rescue. She was just being a street-smart resident of the city, I reasoned.

After what looked like three eternities plus one year on top, my lungs feeling like they were straight from a barbecue oven and my sweaty body feeling like I had taken a plunge inside a six-foot swimming pool, I finally reached the spot where my wallet dropped. Everything was running normally. I despised myself for having entertained the thought that somehow the world would stop in that area because a 25-year-old waiter in the city had dropped his wallet. No one cared. No one seemed to care.

I took a long stare at the road and even crossed to the other side, though I had to be careful with the many speeding vehicles.

My wallet was nowhere to be seen.

I hoped to see something brown with one or two shiny items strewn by; perhaps a coin, my passport photos, or the notes. I entertained this fear that an oncoming vehicle had run over the wallet, squishing it and breaking its entrails to smithereens. I also feared that someone, maybe a motorcyclist, had spotted the wallet then stopped, picked it up, and then sped off.

I saw one or two people looking at me as I toured that side of the road while studying it forensically, as though it had invisible minerals or was a core part of a criminal investigation.

Convinced that the wallet was nowhere to be seen, my next step was to talk to some traders on the side of the road. This was a well-known shopping centre where many businesses thrived.

"Excuse me, madam. Might you have seen a wallet I dropped around this area about 20 minutes ago?" I asked a woman who was selling second-hand sports shoes by the road.

"No, I haven't seen anything like that," she said. I looked into her eyes and thought there was something she wasn't telling me.

"It had my money plus a very important medication receipt. One tooth here is about to kill me, and I am to get it uprooted tomorrow," I said as I opened my mouth to point at the affected tooth.

"Sorry for your loss, but in this city, things move so fast. I won't be surprised if a street urchin picked up the wallet and is now somewhere buying a year's supply of stupefying drugs with the money it had," she said.

My heart felt like it was sinking towards the waste storage departments of my anatomy.

I thanked her then approached a man selling mobile phone accessories at a stall nearby.

"Excuse me, sir. Did you by any chance see a brown wallet I dropped here a short while ago? Or did you see anyone pick it?" I asked him.

The slender businessman, wearing a hat that had gathered a whole day's worth of roadside dust, had the voice of a pastor casting out demons.

"No, I'm not aware. I have a pretty good view of the road, and I should have witnessed it," he said as he licked his lips.

His words made me return to the road to check again. "What if no one noticed the wallet and it's lying just somewhere by the road?" I said to myself.

The second search was resounding in the outcome — there was nothing like my wallet there.

Vehicles roared and rambled by. They left all manner of signatures as they passed. Choking black smoke trailed some. Such smoke has always made my stomach want to do a topsy-turvy, and I feared the ends of the digestive system would swap places due to the doses I was receiving there. Some were very loud, punishing eardrums as they tore through the city. Others looked to be in some sort of dance as they raced eastwards. Some had "wheelbarrow" wheels, the emaciated tubeless ones that are placed when the vehicle owner cannot immediately replace a tyre. There were those that had nimble street children hanging precariously on them. Such street children would not spare my wallet if they spotted it, I reasoned.

When it dawned on me that I was on a wild goose chase, I decided to head to the Stadium Police Station to file a report.

Sunset was fast approaching.

The officer I encountered at the reception seemed tired of the day, disillusioned about the year and generally melancholic about life. If there are people who are nothing to write home about, then he would be their president. He appeared to operate on autopilot when he asked me what was amiss and then fixed an uninspiring gaze on me as I told my story. He was dreamy and distant, asking me to repeat myself in so many instances.

"You say you returned to the spot after 20-plus minutes?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then how on earth can one recover it? You know, a wallet is not like a phone that can be traced using network connectivity. This one will be very hard to locate. A person will collect it, hide it, and lie to your face that they have not seen it. The law doesn't recognise picking a fallen item and keeping it as a crime, you know."

At that juncture, I felt like asking for a toilet with a 1,000-litre septic tank. That was the only capacity that would accommodate the turmoil in me.

"Well, then. Let me just record this for official purposes to help me get an abstract for obtaining another ID," I told the officer.

"That can be done. Otherwise, there is no other way to help you," he said, though he was half-present more or less.

The officer then said, "But you know you will have to get *afande* some tea. We are really facing hard times."

I knew what he meant. You had to know what he meant.

I said, "My mobile money wallet, however, has nothing."

His response was not direct, but the implication of it was that I could not get to record the statement that evening.

"Can't I look for 500 shillings later and then send them to you?" I asked.

"I only do cash. I will be ready when you are," he replied.

Now I felt like my angst needed a toilet with a 10,000-litre septic tank.

It then struck me that that evening, not a single person that I expected to help me did.

“Even the police don’t seem to understand the gravity of my loss. Does anything move anyone in this country anymore?” I wondered.

As I walked out of the station, I made a phone call to Mary Magwi, my supervisor at the Sollglitter Restaurant. It beeped and beeped and beeped, but she did not pick up my call. I knew she was busy at that hour. I also knew that she would not fail to call back at the opportune time.

Now I was walking in the direction of home. It was still quite a distance away, about 12 or so kilometres. I reasoned that I would be better off walking home than to plead with public service vehicle crews to carry me for free. The sun had set and the city was slowly taking a plunge into darkness. Street lights in their lemon yellowness flickered on at around 6.30pm when I was a few steps away from the police station. My supervisor called me at 6.42pm.

“Sorry, Champe, for missing your call,” she started.

She was one of the few bosses in my working life who addressed me by my nickname. I had had five or six bosses before, and all preferred to call me by my official name — Ernest Saisi. There are those who would use Saisi and most used Ernest. But Mary preferred Champe.

“Thank you for calling back so promptly. I know how much work you have,” I said.

“Is everything okay?” she asked. I seldom reached out to her after leaving the workplace.

I then narrated my experience. She felt sorry for me and wondered why I did not contact her earlier.

“Provided you still had your phone with you, you shouldn’t have tried too hard, bothering strangers who won’t care too much even if they saw you being hanged. Calling the right people would have saved you a lot of trouble. I think you must have become a bit confused,” Mary lectured.

It then occurred to me that I wasn’t in the best frame of mind after alighting from the bus. Perhaps because of the irritation by the conductor, my

mind was all over the place. "For instance", I asked myself, "why couldn't I have called a friend, colleague, or relative to ask them to send me money to pay for a motorbike to return me to the spot where the wallet dropped?"

Not long after the call ended, Mary sent me 400 shillings. I withdrew 300 at a nearby mobile money agent then stood at a bus stop at the Kwa Chifu stage, waiting for a bus home. Mary had spared me the agony of walking home in the twilight, a risky endeavour as there was a threat of encountering muggers along the way. As I waited, I was still scanning around to see if someone could emerge from somewhere to announce a lost-and-found wallet.

It was a few minutes after 8pm when I arrived at my house. I was dog-tired. I was not in the mood to prepare or to eat supper. My tummy wasn't full, but hunger was the least of my concerns. All I wanted was a nice, cold shower to wash off the sweat plus the dust, smoke and all else that the chaotic evening had lumped on me. The next day, a Saturday, was my off-day and I had plenty of time to cook and eat in the morning.

As I courted sleep, thoughts about my loss were inevitable. I had never lost my wallet in such a fashion. What drove dread into me was the possibility that someone could impersonate me to open a bank account and such. There were my passport photos and ID; so it couldn't take much else for someone to apply for something as me. The loyalty cards were also susceptible to identity theft, though it was tougher because using them required one to provide a code sent as a text to one's phone number.

I called my bank and was impressed to find a customer care agent who promptly blocked my card from making any transactions. He had to ask a few questions to confirm I owned the account. I must have won him over when I said my balance was no more than 63 shillings, chuckling while at it.

No sooner was I done with the phone call than my bad tooth began aching. I had to go for my painkillers. At that moment, it became even more evident that the biggest loss caused by the dropping of the wallet was the payment receipt for a dental procedure.

If the hospital, by any chance, insisted that I produce the receipt before undergoing the procedure, then I would have to live with the cantankerous tooth for some time.

Luckily for me that day, the tooth obeyed the painkillers, enabling me to ease into the valley of slumber.

While asleep that night, I had a strange dream in which I was being pursued by a massive octopus on dry land. It was a weird dream by all accounts because octopuses live and hunt in the seas. More so, I had never heard of octopuses that grow to be the size of small cars like the one in the dream. Its tentacles lashed at me as I ran for my life, my speed helping me avoid getting entangled with each onslaught. I woke up just as I fell into a hole. I have always thought about that dream and whatever coded message, if any, it may have packed.

CHAPTER TWO



That Saturday morning, I woke up feeling hungry. My first port of call after bed was the kitchen. Three eggs gave way and landed in a pan after a beating. The aroma was so good that it could bring a skeleton back to life. I also prepared a sizeable mound of *ugali*. I felt human again after tearing down the combination. I washed it all down with black tea.

Mary, my supervisor, had informed my colleagues about my predicament. I spent a good part of my morning hours assuring them that, as much as I was worried, I was not overwhelmed. I also had to promise them that I would go to the police station to file my report. Some sent some cash to support me. One wired some 300 shillings. Then 250 shillings chimed in. Fifty shillings landed from somewhere. It touched me because, at that time of the month, a person earning as much as we did didn't have much left. Waiters and waitresses are not rich people, you know.

Upon my return to the Stadium Police Station, I found a different officer on the desk. This one was much more present and alert.

"Why did you not record your statement yesterday immediately after the incident?" the officer asked.

"I didn't have the 500 shillings. I now do," I said.

"What 500?"

"The officer who was at this desk yesterday said that was the amount I needed to pay. He said he would be ready when I was."

At once, he understood what was at play and did not ask any more questions along that line, perhaps worried that his colleague had made a bribe sound like a mandatory and official levy. This particular officer did

not ask for the money, though he also gave the impression that he couldn't reject it if I gave it to him. They say light is white due to the presence of all colours and black when no colour is present. His attitude towards taking my bribe was white, not black.

"Good to encounter an officer with some shame. Not free from corruption; but with some shame. Most must be having shame pulled out during training," I thought to myself.

I left the station with an OB number and a stamped abstract pertaining to the loss of my national ID.

My next destination was Masotop Hospital. I had struck up a rapport with the dentist there. He had long advised that the tooth, which had been a nightmare for me for more than a year, was beyond salvaging. It was to go, and this was the day that would happen.

I did not think the lack of a receipt would be a problem. In any case, they must have kept their records. I knew how much I had paid: 22,500 shillings. It was done at around 10am the previous Saturday, and all that was remaining was the actual tooth extraction.

After I explained my situation to a young man who was manning the reception, I sat down at the waiting bay as he escalated my matter to the next office.

A few minutes later, he told me the receipt would be a mandatory requirement for tooth removal. I called my dentist and explained the situation. He was sympathetic but quick to note that the money side of the hospital was the one calling the shots.

"Without their blessings, I will be in a lot of trouble if I conduct any procedure," he said, then went ahead to explain how doctors actually feel when patients are denied care because they lack money.

"It is one of the things that keep reminding me that poverty is a sentence that can move your date of death forwards or backwards," he said at the tail end of our call.

I was not ready to go back home without a further explanation.

The young man said, "There was an issue that arose in our systems and some records got corrupted. I think it was hit by hackers. That is why no other proof exists except your receipt."

I found this strange.

"Is there no way you can track payments made last Saturday? I'm sure there are not many people who paid the same 22,500 that I paid that morning," I argued.

His answer before he busied himself on his computer was: "I'm sorry, Ernest. There is no other way I can help you."

What a disappointment! How could a hospital of such calibre not have a way of telling who paid? I regretted having paid in cash. Had I used mobile money, I would probably have had a text message as proof, and the hospital's winding explanations would be dead in the water.

Now I had to live with my ill-tempered tooth, soothing it with painkillers that it routinely ignored, to make my life bearable. Till I found the receipt, I had legally not paid 22,500 shillings off my savings to Masotop Hospital. I suspected that someone in the hospital realised that I had lost proof of payment and decided to be clever, perhaps to cook books and get the sum for themselves. This was a tricksters' city, after all.

I went home nursing a throbbing migraine and a tooth that felt as though the nuclear fusion through which the sun generates energy was also happening inside it.

The place I called home was a rented room in an eight-storey apartment on the eastern side of Naii City. My house was on the fifth floor. Without a lift, walking to and from my floor was proper exercise. One of the most refreshing and, at the same time, most frustrating sections of the building was the uppermost floor. It is where the scores of residents' children played. It was also where clothes were aired, and it was always a battle between finding a place where children wouldn't mess with the clothes and finding a space at all. Loud music could be heard blasting from one house or another, serving the residents with unwelcome and unsolicited sound waves. Quarrels among neighbours were not rare, and there would every so often be free entertainment in the form of loud exchanges sea-

soned by the choicest of expletives and the heaviest of brickbats. I used to view my apartment as a microcosm of our country, and on some days I considered it a miniature Tower of Babel.

I had a girlfriend. Winstar Malibu was her name. She was in a teachers' training college that year. I called her upon arrival at my house.

"I am forced to live with this tooth indefinitely," I told her after narrating my ordeal.

She pitied me.

"That is so reckless of a hospital we respect that much. They have lost one admirer in me," Winstar remarked.

"Make it two," I answered.

When the call was done, I wanted to take a nap. However, as it quickly turned out, my brain commandeered it into a stock-taking session. I now started asking myself whether I had made enough inquiries regarding my lost wallet the previous day. Why did I not talk to more traders, more people? What if I made and printed a notice about the loss, together with my phone number, and posted it around Kwa Chifu? Surely, I reckoned, even with the man-eat-man society that we lived in, there was a chance that the wallet fell into the hands of a well-intended citizen. Perhaps there was someone somewhere keeping it for me; waiting. However, I discarded the thought of a Good Samaritan as quickly as it came because I knew the people of this city, the capital city of mistrust, a city where the frequently unasked questions are: "Help you? As who? Of what value are you to me?"

"By now, perhaps the acquirer of my wallet has blacked out after a night of indulgence with my 5,260. Perhaps they are now salivating at the prospect of getting more via my ATM card, thinking there is a fortune in the linked account," I thought to myself.

That mid-morning, as I rested in bed while planning to do my laundry later in the day, I made a resolution — that I could visit the area around Kwa Chifu on Stadium Road every Friday to ask around. I lost my wallet on a Friday and I surmised that if I visited every Friday, which is the day of

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the week that I usually came out of my workplace relatively early and I had my day-off the next day, I would try to befriend the traders there and perhaps get someone who might have spotted anything to do with the dropping of my wallet.

CHAPTER THREE



Two Fridays into my weekly visits to the market, I was arrested.

I had gone to a shop that sold general items like milk, airtime, and all the fast-moving goods. I had bought a soda while attempting to strike a rapport with the shopkeeper. I made every effort to sound cordial as I asked him about business in general and the shopping centre in particular.

I remember asking him questions like, “Do you think I can break even fast enough if I open a shop like yours here?” “What are the crime rates in this area?” “How much of a menace are the street families?” “Do suppliers complain of difficulties accessing this place?”

I was almost done gulping down my soda and having what I thought was a lukewarm conversation — lukewarm because the shopkeeper kept his answers short and humourless —when two police officers arrived.

One of them focused on me and I thought it was the police trying to be all human and relatable. I quickly realised how wrong I was. He was there to arrest me.

“Why are you here, poking your nose into businesses in the area? You must be one of the crooks who keep breaking into businesses here,” said the plumper of the two policemen.

On his waist dangled a gun about half the length of the ones the police usually carried with them. Its translucent magazine made it possible to see the bullets in it, and it was clear communication that there was ready ammunition to deal with any transgressors. In Naii City, the capital of mis-

trust, it did not take much goading of the police for the bullets to be transferred from the magazine into your body.

"Bring your hands here," barked the other officer, whose slenderness was more in tandem with the economic situation of the country.

I complied pronto.

I then learnt that I was to be processed to be charged with loitering with the intention of committing a crime. The slender officer told me they had received information from a businessperson in the area that a certain young man was moving suspiciously.

"Someone believes you are using a fake story of losing a wallet to enable you to conduct espionage ahead of a possible raid," he said.

I was shocked.

When they learnt that I had a valid OB entry regarding the wallet loss at the very station where I was being held, the officers became more understanding. One suggested that I talk to the station's commander to discuss the possibility of being released without being taken to court that Monday. It sounded like a brilliant idea and I immediately asked to be taken to the commander.

My bubble burst when I learnt that I would have to part with 15,000 shillings to secure my freedom. This wasn't a government levy or anything; it was to go to the commander's wallet. That message didn't come directly from the station commander, but it was made abundantly clear to me.

I was dumbfounded.

Faced with the choice of either being dragged to court or paying the amount that was double what I used to pay in rent, I consulted cellmates and a few other people.

The consensus seemed to be that I was better off paying the money than brave it all for a court session. The police interpreted choosing court as a sign of defiance. One person — I don't remember who — told me it was a lose-lose situation even if I were to be declared innocent later by the court. By that time, the person said, I would have wasted a lot of precious time with the slow-moving wheels of justice. It meant requesting days-off

numerous times, and such were hard to come by. I also risked spending lots of money on fares, not to mention the need to hire a lawyer.

One cellmate, who introduced himself as a serial arrestee, told me, "Our courts being what they are, 11th-hour postponement of cases is the order of the day. You will go to court one day expecting the pronouncement of the final word on the case, only to hear the court clerk announcing that the magistrate is sick or in some fix and that your matter has been pushed to the next year or even the year after next."

I made calls here and there and was able to raise the 15,000 shillings. I was able to make the calls because the commander, on realising I was a potential source of easy money, allowed me unfettered access to my phone. As soon as I sent the money to a number I had been given, I was a free man. Needless to say, the number belonged to someone else, not the commander. He knew how to hide his tracks.

I felt born anew when I knew that the stench of the police cells was no longer part of my ecosystem. About 90 percent of the air in that place was occupied by a pungent smell of urine that must be the gaseous equivalent of what a knockout punch feels like. The other 10 was shared between oxygen, the smell of excrement and the smell of sweaty humans. It is the nostrils that celebrate the most when you leave such a place — though they may pack some take-away tuberculosis from there.

I returned to my house at around 5pm, feeling hungry and angry. I could not prepare my food fast enough. This was the first proper meal I was to have after more than 24 hours. The quick route, as usual, was *ugali* and eggs. This time around, I included sour milk in the equation. You know I want to eat heavy when sour milk is part of the menu. The eggs did not turn out as I wanted, perhaps because I cooked them in a hurry. They came off the pan in bits and pieces, not very much bonded with the tomatoes and onions. Also, the salt was a bit on the higher side. I recalled the cliché: Remember to add enough food to your salt. I chuckled but was in no mood for light moments. This food was a trillion times better than the nightmare cabbage and grotesque *ugali* that were served in the police cells.

As I ate, feeling life slowly return to me with each ingested mound, my thoughts went back to Stadium Road and its traders. "Who may have called the police on me?" I wondered. I had only gone there for two consecutive Fridays after the loss of my wallet. Who is this that felt so threatened that they made this a police matter? In such a relatively busy part of Naii City, how come I stood out that easily? Was it my tufty hair, my lush eyebrows or my athletic build? You know, I got the nickname "Champe" because I used to play basketball in my high school days. My height was an asset. My not-too-static reflexes helped me make crucial blocks on the court. I was never the best shooter, but a basketball team needs much more than people who can throw the ball into the 18-inch hoop. Defending wins team titles, as the sporting adage goes, and I helped my school capture a few of those. In my final year of high school, our team went up to the national finals, emerging second overall. It was during that impressive run that my nickname "Champe" became mine for good. One of the cheering chants said Champe was mean in court and took no prisoners. It said Champe's presence on the court meant our team's basket was under lock-and-key.

I liked the nickname.

After high school, I studied hospitality. It was not an automatic favourite, but it also wasn't something I loathed. After obtaining my diploma, I decided to get a practical feel of the industry by starting at the very bottom of the chain, which is being a waiter. I was out to learn all the tricks of the game as I explored ways of raising money to start my own hotel one day. I wanted it to sprout into a chain of hotels later. It was baby steps for a start. One day at a time.

My thoughts then wandered into my light complexion, which was a blessing and at the same time a curse. A tall young man of six feet is easy to notice. A tall, six-foot, light-skinned man is even easier to spot. That must have made me an easy target. Regardless, why would anyone think I could be linked to crime? I couldn't understand.

Still deep in those thoughts, Winstar called me from her college. I informed her of my arrest and she was shaken.

"Will you be returning to that place?" she asked me.

"I think I might stop going there," I replied. "If they called the police on me, next time they might brand me a petty thief and send me to my maker in a suit made of flames."

"It is a very distrustful world we live in," she said. "I wonder whether there is a day we will have the intentions of everyone presumed to be good unless proven otherwise."

"That can only happen in utopia," I quipped.

"It can happen. Go to the countryside and see for yourself. With fewer people, who know each other, some problems cease to exist."

"You have a point."

At that exact juncture, my problematic tooth got into its element again.

"Oh, the tooth. It spared me in the cells but now it is doing its thing with a vengeance," I told her.

I could hear her sigh on the other side of the line as she remarked, "That tooth is a real sadist."

She would have been visiting me often, except that there were strict movement restrictions in the college.

"I'm afraid I have got to hang up now, sweetheart," I told her.

"No worries. I understand," she said, finishing with a half-whispered "bye".

I dashed for my painkillers. This tooth had seen a number of procedures performed to improve it. There had been cleaning, disinfecting, refilling and many other "ing"s. It would be fine for a while before its cavity was exposed again, taking me back to square one. After chewing a considerable amount of money from me, I decided to part ways with it. I would have loved to have it with me for the longest, but it was like that evil friend who can be of great help one moment but cause untold damage in a heartbeat.

What kept that tooth in its place was the payment receipt in the lost wallet.

Darkness was engulfing my neighbourhood. As I drew the window curtains after switching on the lights, I considered employing another strategy in trying to locate my wallet. "What if I start by befriending one of the seemingly lowly sellers there?" I asked myself.

I resolved to engage the maize seller. The boiled eggs and sausages vendor. The seller of cockroach and rat extermination products. The shoe shiner. If I earned the trust of these, I reasoned, I would have built a base from which I could network with virtually everyone around Kwa Chifu on Stadium Road.

I knew whom to start with.

That Sunday, as I returned to my workplace, I knew my colleagues were dying to hear about my arrest. I described the mirthless officer who arrested me. I described in detail the tired and hopeless black vehicle in whose back cabin I sat for that ride that lasted 15 minutes or so. I told them how I was disgusted by the thought that that was the cabin that carries the bodies of people killed in every which way, with their corpses in various states of goriness and decomposition. During that ride, one officer tried to be chatty and warm but I was in no mood for small talk. I told my workmates about being ordered to clean the pail that contained detainees' bodily wastes while in the cells that Friday evening. I told them my nose felt so overwhelmed that it almost started vibrating.

Some words of counsel came in return, for instance from Mwibu Mwitole, a fellow waiter.

"Those are the refinery processes that make a man. That is the path a man must follow to become a legend. Remember the freedom fighters? You are headed for legend status," he advised.

Mwibu and I were employed at Sollglitter Restaurant at the same time. I told him my story as we dried dishes.

"I agree with you on the plan to approach the lowliest of the traders around Kwa Chifu. I'd suggest that you endeavour to befriend the very first trader you spoke with on the evening you lost your wallet. She will definitely have no reason to doubt your intentions," advised Mwibu. I told him I would give it a shot.

CHAPTER FOUR



Remember the mobile phone accessory seller? The one who told me he was at a vantage point and was therefore sure to witness any incident by the road? He was my first pick in my revamped strategy.

I let two Fridays pass before I returned to the site. I was delighted to find the man there, his hat dustier than before because this was the dry season and dust was being tossed about with abandon.

"Do you remember me?" I asked him after exchanging greetings.

He took one hard look at my face but did not immediately respond.

"I am Ernest. I spoke to you a couple of weeks ago when I dropped my wallet on this stretch of the road," I said as I pointed at Stadium Road in front of us. During that moment, an overloaded garbage lorry tiptoed eastwards, leaving a deathly odour suspended in the air.

"Ah, Ernest. I remember someone asking me about a wallet, though you appeared shorter on that day," he said.

"I don't think I've changed, but you never know. They say a human stops growing vertically by the age of 20, but every rule has an exception. I could be one of the few 25-year-olds who have grown taller," I said in jest. "Anyway, I have had no luck getting back the wallet. I'm here to ask you if you may have heard anything about it."

Before he could answer, a middle-aged man stormed his stall.

After hurried greetings, he went straight to his message.

Help You? As Who?

He told the mobile accessory seller, "I am in a fix. I have no phone on me. Mine was damaged by my children. Can you please lend me yours so I can make a call? I will reimburse the airtime and leave you a little on top."

The answer was a firm no.

"I'm sorry, I can't help. My phone is low on charge," the seller said. You did not need to be a savant to tell he was lying.

The man then turned his attention to me and asked if I could help.

I had taken note of his creased coat, his worn-out shirt collar. I had observed his leather shoes that were once black but were now turning into some greyish shade of brown. I did not fail to notice his "obey the wind" trousers that had mud stains on them. I was moved to help.

"Here, take my phone," I offered. At that very moment, I saw the mobile accessory seller throw a quizzical glance at me.

The man moved a few paces from us and made his call, conversing in a local dialect. He was done after about three minutes, though the time seemed longer because I started entertaining thoughts that this might have been a confidence trickster who had found an unbelievably easy target. I had heard stories of people who borrowed phones that way and vanished in thin air.

To my relief, he returned the phone along with a 50-shilling note.

"I've spent no more than 15 shillings in airtime, but you can take the balance as your bonus," he said. His accent made every "sh" sound like a "s" and I thought it was interesting.

"No, sir. If you give me 20 shillings, I'll be good," I said.

He looked into my eyes as if to confirm whether I wasn't being sarcastic. He then handed me a 20-shilling coin, not saying a word more but showing his gratitude by repeated hand signs.

When he was gone, the trader was on my case.

"You are yet to move on from the loss of a wallet and you want to court more losses, I see. Do you think people are fools when they refuse to help

others with phones in this city?" he asked me as he dusted his wares for the umpteenth time.

Before I could reply, he went on, "What if that man used your phone to lure someone into a death trap? What if it is a robber who is communicating with other robbers about their next quarry? These things can be tracked by the police and place you in a crime that you may not be able to extricate yourself from."

I was partially in agreement with his argument, but I had a rejoinder.

"What if this was a man who genuinely needed to call someone? What if he is a sick man who wants to alert someone that he is running out of medicine? What if it is a father who needs to take care of some urgent family business?" I asked.

The trader held his arms akimbo and looked at me, rather dismissively.

"Where is your ancestral home?"

"Enzori," I said.

"Listen here, young man. This is a city, not a village. The trust you give your folks at Enzori should end right in the village. The moment your vehicle to the city moves past the last market selling produce taken straight from a farm by the people selling it, everyone around you becomes a suspect. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't get it. We are humans first before we become names on pay-rolls and business registration certificates. It is a competitive city, yes, but it should never be an inhuman city," I lectured back.

"I like your optimism, but I know you are a young boy with over-romanticised views of the world. The city will soon teach you. It has just begun. The true colours of this chameleon of a city will reveal themselves to you soon," he philosophised.

I thought the exchange was a good ice-breaker. Not too long afterwards, I bade farewell to the trader and promised to pass by the next Friday.

"You are very welcome any time, though I have no way of telling if you are here to study my trade secrets and soon drive me out of town," he said, laughing exaggeratedly.

"I am a mere waiter, buddy. I have neither the wherewithal nor the expertise to run such a business," I answered as I walked away.

On my way to the bus stop, I stopped to have a chat with one of the beggars along the pavement that was separated from Stadium Road by a ditch. From the way he addressed me, I was not sure whether he was conversant with me or if that was his formula for getting philanthropic passers-by to reach deeper into their pockets.

After dropping the 20-shilling coin I had got from the man who used my phone, I got him talking.

"How is the day going?" I asked.

"Disaster. No one is giving anything these days."

"What do you mean? Are residents becoming poorer or is their motivation to give is waning?"

"You tell me," he said as he caressed the end of the stub left after the amputation of his right leg.

As I walked away, I told him, "I will do the homework on why people are not giving. I will get back to you."

CHAPTER FIVE



Upon my return the following Friday, I hoped to build on my relatively uneventful return to the Kwa Chifu locality after the arrest. I still had no idea who had informed the police about me or how he or she was feeling about seeing me return there.

Before I went to the phone accessories trader, who I had learnt was called Samuel Kio, I passed by the woman who was the first trader I had talked to regarding the wallet. She sold second-hand sports shoes. She was busy haggling with customers. She would ask for 1,000 shillings and the buyer would counter-offer with all of 100 shillings. It was interesting to watch the battle of wits. She repeatedly said that if she sold for a certain price, then she would be doing “church work”, meaning she would cease being a businesswoman and become an unpaid volunteer, a Mother Teresa. Who actually knows whether they lie about this? Moreover, this was the outskirts of Naii City, the city where everything needed to be taken with a pinch of salt.

By the way, is there anything wrong when a buyer haggles the price down from 1,000 to 250 shillings then presents a 1,000-shilling note to pay for the product? Can the seller be tempted to ask, “So you had the money all along?”

The sports shoe seller had improvised a sitting area where customers would sit and try their picks.

Her customers called her Zamale.

Some people looked like they were just there to kill time and not really to make any purchases. One of the buyers, a young, sporty woman, made what I thought was a very shrewd purchase.

Once Zamale was unoccupied with the bargaining and all, I began the conversation.

"You might remember me. I came here a while ago as I looked for my wallet that had dropped on the road," I said after greetings. It occurred to me that the first thing she noticed about me was my shoes. She might have thought I was a new customer or something.

"Ah, I have a vague recollection. Did you ever recover it?" she asked as she rearranged her stocks here and there.

"Nope, but I'm still optimistic," I said.

"I admire your optimism. If it were me, I would have given up a very long time ago," she remarked.

"You can give up", I said, "but not when you have a tooth that aches any time it pleases and rudely reminds you of a treatment receipt you must trace to have it extracted".

"You mean there wasn't a backup of the payment information somewhere? I thought any business that pays tax keeps copies of receipts?"

"Apparently, no; though I suspect that someone decided to be clever upon learning that I had lost the receipt."

"I'm really sorry for your plight", she sighed, "I haven't heard anyone say anything about any wallet dropped on the road. We have an online network and we know each other pretty well. I haven't heard a word about that."

"Okay. If you happen to hear anything, please call me," I said as I jotted down my phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to her.

I reached the stall of Samuel, the phone accessory seller, not too long after. I found him deep in a chat with another trader who ran a shop nearby.

"Did you watch the TV story last night?" Samuel asked me as soon as I joined them.

"No, I didn't get to watch TV yesterday. I spent about three hours waiting for a bus and getting stuck in traffic. What story is that, though?"

"The one about a cartel that places beggars all over Naii City."

"I've seen a post or two on social media, but I had little time to dig up the information."

"The beggars we so passionately give alms to are part of someone's business model. The money we give to the supposedly needy cases goes towards enriching schemers who collect people with disabilities from far and wide, some even from neighbouring countries," Samuel said, his eyes lit up and gesturing with his index fingers.

His interlocutor went radical: "I give money to a disabled person hoping I am helping them survive while in reality they are a collector tunnel for a fat cat somewhere who forces them to live in squalor while he or she drives fuel guzzlers. No beggar from today henceforth, genuine or not, will see another coin from me."

My mind went back to the man in a wheelchair that I had been helping with an odd coin once in a while. At that very moment, I felt like going to ask him if he was also part of such a scheme.

"I have recently made a friend not too far from here," I told the two men. "He has an amputated leg. I would love to hear from him on this."

"I know him", the other trader said, "he is part of the cabal. Today, he is not in his usual spot. I think the people running the racket are scared of the ramifications following the television exposé."

While fixing his gaze on me, Samuel said, "You see now? This village worldview of yours that makes you start pitying people in this city needs a review. This is a concrete jungle. This is a ring where everyone wants to knock out the other and finish the bout at the earliest opportunity."

Trying to sound sarcastically simplistic, I asked, "So, there is absolutely no one worth trusting?"

"The only person you can trust is yourself. The other one is no one," said Samuel. "I have seen my friends trust customers to the extent of giving them goods on credit. Then those customers disappear in thin air, leaving them on a downward spiral. My survival secret in this city is to treat everyone as a suspect. The moment a person asks for help, the question that

forms in my mind, but which I never ask, is, 'Help you? As who? Who am I to you?'"

As I headed home that day, I confirmed that the man on a wheelchair that I had befriended was not there. Most of the beggars who were usually based along Stadium Road were also missing. It got me thinking about Samuel's words: who was to be trusted in this city? I thought of the pastor whose voice was forcefully delivered to my house every weekend evening thanks to the booming speakers he had invested in. Was he out to win souls or was it all about money and personal gain? I thought of the various children's homes across the city and the men and women who ran them. Were these people genuinely out to help the children or was this a cash cow for them? Was there really anyone being good for the sake of being good?

I used Winstar as my sounding board that evening while reflecting on those realities. She was of the opinion that everyone is self-centred in one way or another; that it is natural for a human to seek fame or fortune by championing what looks like a noble cause at face value.

"I think the line is crossed when there is too much pretence," she said. "I would prefer a semi-nude call girl who gets money from an illicit exchange to a suit-clad pastor using sugar-coated blackmail to squeeze the last coin from an impoverished believer."

I had questions.

"Won't such a way of thinking make a lot of things non-existent? Won't people stop donating to children's homes when they start thinking that they are helping someone stock a shop, for example, whereas there are orphans who really need food and other necessities?" I asked her.

"Well, there is that time-tested policy: trust but verify. That should be the mantra for everything. Trust that bugger offering you a chance to buy something cheaply, but make your own efforts to verify their claims. Otherwise, you will be getting conned every other day," Winstar replied.

"That's quite a good perspective," I replied.

Not too long afterwards, I was out on airtime. We had to say our good-byes.

CHAPTER SIX



The following Friday, I made another stop at Stadium Road. I used the road every day to and from work, but I had chosen Fridays to be the days for stopping there mid-journey home in my dogged quest to find my wallet through befriending traders.

Upon alighting that Friday, I approached a fruit vendor. She was a woman with a radiant smile. Her orange apron was somehow in tandem with the oranges that formed part of her stock. She knew her fruits, this vendor. A mango I bought was a mere malleable plaything before her schooled hands that turned it dexterously under a gush of tap water, then sliced it into neat and symmetrical pieces. By the time the mango reached me, resting on a piece of a plastic bag, it was as though it was under a spell.

"You're such a natural at this. The mango just gives way. It totally surrenders to you," I told her as I dug into the fruit.

She chuckled.

I then informed her about the loss of my wallet not too far from her establishment. She listened attentively then urged me to forget about the wallet.

"You say how many months have passed?"

"Five."

"Do you think anyone can stay for five months just waiting for the owner of the wallet they picked? By now, they have probably forgotten about the find."

"I know", I replied, "but I also think there is hope. In my heart of hearts, I also consider it a lost cause. I have even started saving again to raise my

tooth extraction costs, though the savings account is growing slower than this mango would fall if I were to throw it down when standing on the surface of the moon."

I always found it hard to ask traders their names, but I did not feel much inhibited with this fruit seller.

"Call me Asha. Asha Omar," she replied upon my request.

Asha's stall was an interesting space. She had given it a fruity ambience. Even in the absence of the fruits she stocked, there was some fruitiness about the place. On the counter were jugs containing fruit juices of all kinds. They were of different colours, from a dull yellow to a vibrant green. On the walls, stickers emblazoned with all manner of messages hit customers' eyes. I photographed some using my phone camera.

One read: "They ask you to pay first at the pub because after consuming their stuff, you transform into someone else. You can, however, consume and then pay for our smoothies because they bring out an improved, smoother you."

Another read: "One wonders whether the snake in the Garden of Eden was the first smoothie operator."

Then there was another: "When lemons give you lemonade, do you ever pose to think about the life you are giving them? Little wonder they are always wrinkled with worry."

As I read them, smiling at the wit, I asked her, "Where do you get all these?"

"Do you like them?"

"Yeah."

"If I tell you, I'm afraid I will have to kill you and blend you to *smooth-ereens*."

We laughed.

Right at that moment, a well-fed woman walked into the shop. She greeted Asha and then stole a glance at my face. I knew her somewhat. She ran a mobile money shop a few blocks away. I had tried befriending her,

but she was just never in the mood. There were times I thought she was the one who had called the police on me, given the fact that cash-rich investments like hers were common targets for robbers.

"I see you are improving the amount of vitamins in our tall friend," she said, deliberately avoiding looking in my direction.

"Yes," Asha answered. "Tall, brown, and handsome."

We all laughed.

"By the way, who said that 'dark' is the ideal in this part of the world and not 'brown'?" the rotund visitor asked, shocking me as it emerged that she had something of a sense of humour.

"Ask him," Asha said as she looked at me with a bemused face.

"I don't know what you two are talking about," I said, laughing.

I knew what they were talking about. I didn't want to be part of such a conversation, though. I wanted this to remain purely a wallet quest.

As the two women chatted the afternoon away, a mother carrying a baby on her back and holding a young girl of about four or five by the hand walked in. She carried a loaded basket on her head. She reminded me of the industrious women in my village who would carry loads of items plus their children in one fell swoop, and it would be all in a day's work for them. This one was living the village life in the city, given the way the basket was casually perched on her head.

"Hello, ladies and gentleman. I am Meksho. I have travelled here to buy two *karaïs*. I'm told there is a shop nearby that sells them at good prices. I am wondering if you can keep my basket for a short while. I will be back in no longer than two hours," she said in a manner that suggested that this was not the first place she was visiting with that request.

The reaction from the two women was an inspection from head to toe.

Done with her quick inspection, Asha said, "I'm sorry, my sister, but we can't help today. I don't keep people's luggage here."

The mother didn't utter a word more. With Asha's words, she marched out. Her luggage, a basket that contained what looked like a heavy consignment of green maize, stayed perched on her head.

"We don't keep people's luggage anyhow," Asha told me when I questioned her decision. "You may be storing stolen items or even a bomb. The last thing I want is to add new problems to the many I have."

"But what if she was simply in need of a place to keep her luggage as she ran her other errands? The children were enough load, clearly," I argued.

"This is Naii City. It's no place for casual sympathies. If you are a stranger to me and you want us to deal beyond a buyer-seller transaction, the answer from me will be no, eleven out of every ten times," Asha said emphatically.

"Does that mean all the residents of this city should leave their souls in their rural homes before coming here to chase after money?" I asked.

"Something of that sort," replied the other woman.

When I reached home that evening, I could not help but think about the soullessness of the city. I wrote in my journal a poem that I titled "Bye, My Soul":

O, dear soul, we've reached the 'no entry' point
Seen the notices about no pets allowed? No kids allowed?
The silent rule in this city is: no souls allowed!
Man-eat-man, man-distrust-man
Man-con-man, man-use-and-dump-man
When I need you, soul, I'll let you know
But for now, soul, it's au revoir

CHAPTER SEVEN



One mistake I will live to regret is approaching some street families around Kwa Chifu in my quest to widen the wallet search net as far as possible.

"I am ready to let go of the cash. What I badly want are my cards and my dental payment receipt," I told a scrawny man who introduced himself as their leader.

He was born and raised in the streets, where fights are commonplace and disease is the name of the game. He had scars on every possible stretch of his face, attesting to the fact that he wasn't raised on pancakes and omelettes. His life was more egg-on-face in the literal sense.

His slang was at least three times detached from the street slang I knew. Such families kept inventing new words on the streets to code their messages due to the fact that they did not go to school to be taught a foreign language that would enable them to switch languages like those who spoke "mainstream" slang did.

He said what I understood to be a hint that someone might have picked up something.

"I know exactly how to help you. Let me take you to the person I heard say something about a wallet."

If only I knew it was a big fat lie and I was being trapped!

He led the way. I followed.

He wore a black shoe on the left foot and a white one on the other. They seemed to be of a similar make, so they were somewhat stylish. His coat looked like a gathering point for all the disease-causing germs from all

the nooks and crannies of Naii City. His hair was reminiscent of a badly maintained tea plantation. The red in his eyes suggested Christmas décor, whereas we were in October. His trousers were made of the material that laments "shu shwi shu shwi" when walking. His haggardness notwithstanding, he had some swagger in his steps. I think people must have wondered why a relatively well-dressed young man was following a veteran street boy and where they were heading.

I followed on, occasionally throwing in the question of whether he was sure about where we were going. His refrain was: "Relax. This is our city. We run this city."

In one instance, he said, "As long as you are with me, you are safe. I know this city like I know where the sun rises from."

I was being led into a dungeon. This dawned on me when we reached a smelly stretch of a riverbank populated with tin shacks. It is a place that no person with anything to lose can dare venture into. It felt as if I was at the bottom of a toilet pit.

By that time, I had established that the man was called Goma. Everyone called him so. Goma was about to push me into the rough hands of his criminal gang.

One moment I was trekking with him as we got farther and farther from Stadium Road; the other moment I was being ordered around in an ill-lit room where a group of six or seven men sat, chewing khat. There was also one woman in the group, and she appeared pregnant.

It took some time for my eyes to adjust to the minimal illumination in the room. Goma seemed not to have such a problem, as if he was a master of darkness and the dark arts. By the time I had adjusted to the illumination, I was on the receiving end of the gang. It was clear from the time I entered that room that we were not coming to see a person who had picked up a wallet.

"Speak again about wallets and your body will be floating in the river by evening," Goma, who showed a completely different face as soon as I was in the enclosure, said as he pulled out a gun from somewhere. My heart was beating in triples.

"Those shoes. How much can they fetch at the market?" Goma asked me. I hesitated for a while because I thought the question was channelled to the gang until a thud landed on my head, slightly above the nape. It was a bare-knuckled blow from Goma. It brought the sound of crickets from a place I couldn't locate.

"I bought them for 2,600 shillings," I said as I took in air between my teeth as my body reflexively responded to the blow to the head.

"Good. That can fetch 1,000 or thereabouts. Take them off!" one of the men in the gang roared.

I felt a tad dizzy as I took off my black leather shoes and handed them to the steely man.

I used to dismiss as hogwash the tales of people in the city being cornered and robbed of everything they had on them; everything they were not born with. That day illustrated to me, with the aid of slaps, that such a way of being robbed was not an urban legend. I thought I was having a bad dream when I removed the last bit of clothing on me—my boxer shorts. I felt like a fish out of water. Or, more accurately, I felt like a helpless slice of bread lying before a hungry brood of chickens.

I felt relieved, but at the same time perforated, when they ordered me to get out while in my birthday suit.

"You have five minutes to leave, or you will know the source of the bodies that are found every so often on the Naii City River," a very hoarse voice commanded.

There I was, robbed of my means and all my pride. Deflated. Naked. Hurting. Lost a second wallet while hunting for a previously lost one. No socks, no shoes. With a muddied, bleeding body. As I walked barefoot, trying to navigate my way back to Stadium Road, I pinched myself a number of times to be sure this was real.

I was clutching at my private parts, doing my best to hide my face. I spotted a shop not too far from that dinghy establishment where I was robbed.

I thought I could get help there. I was wrong.

The shopkeeper, a woman, must have considered me a madman. My explanation of what happened, plus my request for any clothes for which I would pay later, seemed to be a source of entertainment for her. She laughed heartily before calling her guard, who chased me away. You know the way a cow is driven away by a raised rod? That is the same way I was chased by the warlike guard.

I then spotted a dirty but not-too-damaged pair of shorts on a garbage heap. This was a godsend! I thought I saw a louse or some other parasite cross from one seam to another. I also thought it reeked of urine but anything could do at that moment. With shorts on, at least I could move to the main road. I thought I had made enough friends around Kwa Chifu to have someone buy me proper clothes for me to head home in the hope of forgetting the ordeal as quickly as possible.

As I walked in the pair of shorts I had picked and worn hastily, I thought I felt something biting my groin. I thought I was imagining things until I felt sharp pain on my left thigh. Some parasites were having a field day with a new host. I have never felt more exploited.

I was worrying about many things as I followed the opposite direction of the path Goma had led me. I had not a single nerve to lift my face to look at other road users.

I then heard a motorcycle stop behind me. I stole a glance and noticed the motorcycle had made a U-turn after passing me while heading in the opposite direction. I wondered why someone had to turn in the middle of the road to pursue me.

It turned out to be someone who knew me. The rider remembered me from my days as a secondary school basketballer.

"I had my doubts, but I thought I knew your face pretty well. In case you have forgotten me, I am Collins Ogoro. We once faced each other in a provincial tournament and you were the toughest to beat. I can tell you need help. What happened?" he asked.

It is funny how, in such scenarios, a person's mental health is automatically placed under a microscope. The average observer thinks one has gone nuts.

"I've been robbed blind. I followed a man I thought was trustworthy to a lion's den. It hurts to retell what happened, but I am glad to have made it out with my life," I said to him, involuntarily grabbing my right thigh as a sharp sensation registered there.

"This is Naii, a city constantly experiencing a drought of humaneness. That is how they welcome the uninitiated," he said.

He rode me to a second-hand clothes seller where I got a T-shirt, a pair of trousers, and sandals. I have never worn second-hand clothes without first washing them, but that day I had to. Their smell percolated to the lowest reaches of my tummy and caused a mild stomach upset. It was much, much better than being munched by parasites.

I headed to the Stadium Police Station to report the latest robbery. To date, I have never understood why the police never acted on my report. I had hoped that they would storm the hideout where I was robbed and arrest the perpetrators. I was ready to face them in court. All that was a pipe dream because no aspect of my report was acted upon. It all ended with me obtaining a tiny slip of paper that contained the OB number. Now I had two OBs and counting.

To date, that remains my darkest Saturday. The humiliation of being robbed and stripped deflated me in ways that get more gross every time I remember the incident. I often wonder whether all this could have befallen me had I followed the advice about letting go of the wallet.

On the evening of the day I was robbed, my thoughts went back to the day my mother warned me against getting too attached to some things. It happened years ago. I must have been 10 or 11. We were in church when heavy rain fell on Enzori. When the rain subsided somewhat, my mother and my siblings rushed home. It was a shocking sight. Rainwater had flooded our three houses and damaged or carried away a number of items. The water in the house was slightly above ankle level when we arrived. I could not find the tin in which I used to save my coins. I wanted to save enough to get a new shirt for Christmas. I remember telling my mother, who was by then taking stock of what could be savaged and what was beyond redemption, that I wanted to pursue the tin.

"I am sure it couldn't be carried too far because it is all metal," I said.

Straight away, she told me to abort that mission. I pretended to comply, but I was soon outside our homestead, looking for my lost tin. I followed a furious ditch that was raging with water, looking keenly in the hope of spotting the tin. I was determined to follow all the way to the river, which was about a kilometre away. My mission went so tragically wrong that I was saved by someone just seconds before a gush of water, carrying with it a cluster of twigs, pushed me into the ditch. Had that happened, I would have landed in the river in a matter of seconds, and I would have surely drowned. My rescue happened thanks to a group that was out to look for domestic animals feared to have been carried away.

My mother was miffed when she heard about my close shave. After giving me a proper hiding, she pointed the cane she was using into my eyes and remarked, "I hope this teaches you that some things, when lost, should be allowed to get lost. Else, I will be contacted again someday when you are in real trouble."

The recollection made me dislike that stubborn side of me — that side that kept telling me to push on with my search for the wallet.

I replayed in my mind the events of that day, especially my walk of shame and how I picked up that smelly, lice-infested pair of shorts. I remembered how I used Collins' reflector jacket to cover my torso as we looked for a place to buy clothes. I flashed back to the bellicose laughter of the shopkeeper who thought I was mad. There were many lows that day. That voice questioning the wisdom behind my continued pursuit of the wallet returned. It went ahead to ask whether my weekly visits to Stadium Road, on Fridays and sometimes on Saturdays, were yielding any fruit. I was not ready to make the decision at that moment. I deferred it for later.

"Welcome to Naii City. You have now been officially admitted." Those were the words of Collins as he dropped me home from the police station.

I did not like them.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Despite the unyielding internal voice asking me tough questions, my decision was to continue visiting the Kwa Chifu area. With about 100 businesses and hundreds of makeshift stalls, there was something somewhat addictive about that stretch of Stadium Road. The main building there hosted tens of businesses, with the ground floor largely occupied by car spare parts wholesalers. Different kinds of businesses occupied the other floors, from online-based retailers to insurance brokerages. The building had 15 storeys in total.

If this area of the city were to be compared to a drink, it would be a cocktail. It was a mixture of things of different flavours ranging from mild to tongue-smacking bitter. The flavours of the city also coexisted at different temperatures, some ice-cold and others piping hot. Its traders came in different temperaments, some welcoming; others with German shepherd-type aggression.

If it were to be compared to a book, this would be the high-demand title hidden on the wrong shelf and missing some pages. It was in high demand but some of its amenities were wanting. For instance, garbage accumulated at the collection points for days on end because the local authorities did not feel nauseated enough to clear it as often as was required. This offered a prime chance for rodents to thrive, and rats particularly found a paradise. Books will sometimes feature people's scribbles here and there. This section of Naii City had graffiti—words written in all forms and formations on virtually every plain space. I liked one that contained a single word: "Freedom." I liked the stylishness with which the word was written. Some other writings were election-related. "Zona for MP" was the most widespread.

If that part of the city were to be likened to an animal, it would have been anything wild: aversive to any friendly approach and suspicious of anything and everything, biting anyone who came too close, sometimes pouncing at someone just to prove a point, and hiding its lethal side behind a façade of friendliness until it was alarmed—after which it bared its claws and displayed its sharp teeth.

It was also an area where everything seemed to go well if one had money but unleashed its beastly side when he or she went broke.

In its entirety, Naii City was like quicksand. If you slowed down, you sank. The Stadium Road section of the city was no different. You would sink in that quicksand and all the observers could do was gasp then continue minding their businesses.

I had formed acquaintances there and even expanded my phonebook with new contacts. With the loss of my smartphone, I placed all my hopes on an online contact recovery function. The one loss I could not mitigate, however, were two and-a-half-years' worth of photos and videos I had captured using my phone. My mobile money wallet had been swept clean during the robbery. My body had received about a billion lashes of a rubber whip as the gang asked for the access code to the wallet. I shouted the four-digit code and the gang leader, Goma, keyed it in. He did not show any emotion when it worked. He just handed my phone to the woman in the group, whom I believe was his expectant lover.

By the time I was leaving the dungeon, beaten, bruised and coming within a hair's breadth of death, I had literally lost the sky and the ground.

The encounter with the gang forced me to go to the hospital because my body was aching from every part. I had stepped on a sharp object, probably a thorn or a piece of wood, and it was making its presence felt that evening. I would not have been attended to had my mother not remitted a deposit to the hospital through mobile money. I called her from a borrowed phone and she went into panic mode.

"These people wanted you to die," she sighed. She could have commented about my ill-advised pursuit of the wallet, but I think she saw no need to be quarrelsome at that moment.

She travelled from Enzori to Naii City that night. While she was on the way, I was allowed to go home after a couple of tests and scans showed that I wasn't in any immediate danger. The object on the leg was pulled out, and a wound on the right hand was dressed. Other smaller wounds were cleaned. The bill was 16,135 shillings, a sum my mother raised by reaching out to various people.

She arrived early on Sunday. Before she came to my house, she shopped for a cheap phone worth 1,000 shillings that she carried along with her. With that phone, at least I could stay connected through calls and texts. My stolen smartphone cost 12,000 shillings. I had no idea how to get another.

I was lucky to be out of work that Sunday, which was ordinarily a working day for me. It is because I had accumulated a day off after standing in for a colleague.

I, however, felt that I needed one or two more days to recuperate from the ordeal. My supervisor could have given it, but her word was not final on such matters. In my workplace, offs were about as easy to get as it is to spot a blue moon. There were almost always not enough reasons to grant one a day off. One line would be used often when an off request arose: "We are in the business of serving the stomach, and the stomach knows no offs."

Despite explaining myself to Mary, my supervisor, the instructions were that I should go to work that Monday. I was robbed and hurt on a Saturday, was in the hospital till the early hours of Sunday, but I had to go to work on Monday. My mother wanted me to defy the order to report to work, but I couldn't. I had to chin up and show up.

"Until I can call myself my own boss, there are things I have to stomach," I told her.

I was in sixes and sevens mentally and physically when I reported to my station that Monday morning. The higher-ups at the restaurant saw my bandages and my limping. They must have been concerned because I didn't stay for an hour before I was told that I had been allowed to take three days off.

My supervisor drew me aside and said in a low tone, "Champe, I wish I could have helped yesterday. I believed you, but our bosses didn't."

I had every reason to believe she was lying to me; that she had not pleaded my case firmly enough. However, I was old enough to understand that half the work in a workplace is to balance the small and the big lies.

I was relieved to get three days off, and I made my way back home. My mother, who had spent the night at a relative's home as it was taboo for a mother and a circumcised son to share a roof, was travelling back to the village that morning. I got to bid her farewell and to thank her for her assistance. She took that chance to remind me not to be too clingy.

"Imagine what a mess this world would have been if everyone decided to relentlessly pursue what they lost when they knew there were little chances of recovering it," she said.

"I get you, mum, but remember I have a nagging tooth," I said.

She nodded to indicate she understood.

Speak of the devil, and he will appear. Out of the blue, the tooth that had been cooperative for days started aching. The pain began after I had left my mother and was heading to the bus stop to take a bus home. As I sat in a public resting area to catch my breath before proceeding, the pain began as a distant gnaw. I knew it was about to get really bad, really fast. I had to get home to swallow some painkillers.

Before I rose up to go, a man approached me. He wore a cap emblazoned with the logo of Linkeur Cement. The temples of his thick pair of glasses rested on his ears after digging through a forest of a wayward beard. The collar and the sleeves of the light blue shirt underneath his brownish coat were caked with dirt, and this was evidence that he had gone for days without a shower. Alongside him was an invisible but unmissable smell of sweat. How he picked on me, I couldn't tell.

"My son, I came to this city to process compensation for illegal eviction but it's the same old story at the ministry. Can you please spare 50 shillings to enable me to get home?" he asked, and I thought he was being dramatic with his tone.

I kept silent.

I had with me more than those 50 shillings he wanted, but I was also in much need after the robbery. "What do I do with this man?" I asked myself. This was a city of predators. It was a city where it was not unusual to get a person walking around with a loaf of bread while asking whoever cared to listen to buy them milk to "complete the equation". One would wonder how that person managed to get bread every day if he was that badly off. Or why the person did not go home after getting the first "donation" of milk. This was a city where people would position themselves at supermarket entrances with calls of "we don't want your cash; just buy food". This was a city where women were known to borrow children or make children in quick succession to use them as borrowing props. The motto among them seemed to be: "No story is needed when a child is present. The younger the child, the better." This was a city where people would create Oscar-deserving makeup effects on their bodies using tomato sauce and other substances to create the impression of a festering wound. This was a city where a generous giver gave but regretted it afterwards. The common regret was that they had assisted an undeserving case. The less common one was that they had given too little to someone who genuinely deserved help.

Whether he deserved help or not, I did not care at that moment. I gave the man the 50 shillings he was asking for. I fished it out just as he was about to move to another person, thinking my silence was a denial of his request. Somewhere in my mind, I was toying with the idea that this wasn't a genuine case. However, the opposite hemisphere of my brain urged me on; postulating that it was better to give to an undeserving case than to allow the widespread deceit in the city to numb my conscience.

"Thank you, my son. You don't know just how much headache you have saved me," the man said, sounding like he was uttering that line for the nth time.

"The pleasure is all mine, *mzee*," I said. "And sorry for your troubles. It's going to be alright."

He held the note between his palms, spat on it, clasped the palms as if performing a ritual, looked at me while uttering some words I could not

decipher, then walked away. After a little while, I felt strong enough to head to the bus stop.

CHAPTER NINE



My routine of visiting Stadium Road in the Kwa Chifu stage continued. By December, I had all but forgotten about my wallet. It used to be my first subject in any conversation I had with any new face I met. Eight months later, it had moved lower in the pecking order. By then, I was not sure what exactly I wanted from my visits, but it was safe to conclude that I had come to like the traders based there and their creative ways of earning a living. I admired the woman who told me she had woken up at 4am every day, except Sundays, for three decades. The only exceptions during that duration were the few months she spent at home after giving birth to each of her four children. Dealing in fresh produce, she had carved herself a small niche. She was what you would call a thriving businessperson: not too ambitious to expand exponentially and also not too myopic to get stuck in a rut without making any visible progress.

I had been told stories of a man who, from the profits he made in that area, had bought land, built houses and diversified into the *matatu* business. The traders never looked like they earned much, but their balance sheets were healthy and their boats sailed.

The calendar read December 8 when I went to Kwa Chifu on my usual Friday visits. That day, my trip around the area had to start at a cobbler's place because my left shoe had ruptured somewhere along the length where the sole is joined with the leather. The cobbler I chose for the repair job doubled up as a shoeshine. He was a slender man with tiny eyes that had gunk at each edge almost always. Every time I passed by his shed, I could see him wrestling with a shoe or kowtowing as he wiped and polished a customer's pair. His shed had only a rusty corrugated iron

roof to its name, with the only furniture being two wooden stools that had seen better days.

On seeing me, the cobbler smiled.

I did not read much into that. Isn't it good practice for businesspeople to serve their customers with a smile?

However, there was more to it.

"I know you," he said as he looked me in the eye as if to confirm something.

"That's great. I've visited this place for so long that I am now even known by people I don't know too well. Anyway, my name is Ernest. You?"

"Mwamu."

"Well, Mwamu, for how long have you known me?"

"Since April. I have your photos. Passport photos."

I was getting more confused the more this went on.

"I've had the photos in your wallet since April. I saw it dropping and rushed to the road, risking life and limb. I gathered all its contents that were strewn on the road, and I had to be quick or else I would be flattened there and then. Occasionally, I see you come here to talk to this trader or that. I have never understood why you have been overlooking my business all along," Mwamu said, pausing to let his words cause the effect he wanted.

At this point, a bead of sweat was forming on his forehead. He spoke while hammering a shoe that was placed on a specially carved piece of wood.

It was a hot afternoon.

I felt fat droplets of sweat form on my forehead.

"You have no idea how long I've searched for that wallet and the trouble that search has put me through," I told him, shaking my head.

"It's down to your prejudice, Ernest. You have spoken to all the important shop owners here," he said. He gesticulated quotes using his index and middle fingers when he uttered the word "important".

He went on: "I vowed to myself that I would keep the wallet until you came to me yourself."

"Wow, that was a strong position you took. Just so you know, I have had to live with a bad tooth for all these months because I did not have the one receipt that was in the wallet," I replied.

"Well, had you been more discerning, perhaps you couldn't have suffered that much. Don't look at me and my dirty shoes and assume that I am of no use," he lectured.

"Well, I am totally guilty as charged on this one," I said.

By that time, I had started entertaining doubts.

"What if he was also trying to give me false hope like that son of a gun called Goma then lead me to a godforsaken place where I can be robbed again?" I asked myself. I had been bitten once, and now I was a million times shy.

As if he read my doubts, he fished out the wallet from the breast pocket of his polyester jacket.

Alas! It was the one. The brown wallet that had taken me to hell and back. The small bundle that had taken me to police custody for the first time in my life. This wallet, the holder of vital documents that had led me into a den of urchins who looked capable of strangling the life out of me if I so much as defied one order. This wallet, a possession that put me on an accidental journey into exploring the corner of Nairi City known as Stadium Road and this area called Kwa Chifu in particular. I had by then learnt the area well enough. I was familiar with its oddities, iniquities and unconventional modalities. I had even promised myself to start my first business in that area when the time came. This wallet! This wallet!

All I could do was smile as he handed it over to me. Within me, my heart jumped for joy. All the cash was intact: 5,260 shillings. The Masotop Hospital payment receipt was also there, as were my cards.

"Am I dreaming?" I asked, more to myself than to Mwamu.

In line with a decision I had long made, all the cash was to go to Mwamu. I took out the notes adding up to 5,250 shillings plus the 10-shilling coin and handed them to him. He did not stretch his hand to take the money. He looked at the cash and then at my face.

"My son, if I pocket that money, it will negate all the justification for keeping the wallet intact for so long. Please keep it. You need it. Buy something to celebrate, but please keep me out of it," he said, pulling some sandals from some corner of his shed as soon as he saw a woman approach. She must have given him a pair to repair that he had forgotten about.

"Am I dreaming, my friend Mwamu?"

"No, you're not. You have just met someone who is mindful of others. I know it is a disadvantageous trait to have in this city, but I will keep things that way. I sleep better when I know I have earned my keep fairly," he said.

My tear glands went to work.

After Mwamu fixed my shoes, for which I paid the exact price he asked for, my next destination was clear.

