Solja!

Diary of A Private Security Guard

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Disclaimer

This is not a work of fiction but a true account of happenings in the life of a security guard. I have however used literary license as deemed appropriate. Some names have also been changed to protect the privacy of locations and individuals.

Preface

Private security can be defined as the purchase of personal and physical protection from threats either as an individual or collectively as a group. It is an omnipresent phenomenon that affects everyone daily, making it one of the fastest-growing service industries in Kenya. The most visible face of the industry in the country is the manned security guard tasked with safeguarding property and persons.

Manned security entails an individual or group of individuals determining what they want to pay for as a guarantee of security to themselves, their families, and their properties and who is to provide that service. Hiring a guard is one of the most popular options, with research indicating that the country employs over 800,000 manned guards in different sectors making it the most significant service industry in the country.

With the private security guard being ubiquitous in your daily life, a question juts out: How

well do you personally know of that lonely personality who provides you, your family, and your possessions, especially in the silent hours with peace of mind? What are his fears? His aspirations? What is the conduct of his private life? And what does he think of you?

This book is a true account and a window into the contemporary life of a private security guard within a gated community in the outskirts of Nairobi; it dwells on his thoughts and tribulations as he goes about his humble, boring and repetitive work. Uncharacteristically, it also branches off and delves into the guard's spiritual, private and social moments as a pillar of his local community. The book is a compilation by a retired Kenya Defence Forces officer who is now a security consultant and director of a private security company.

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Tessie Beverley, who were instrumental to the compilation of the book.

In a very special way, I pass my deep appreciation to Maurice Odhiambo and Teresa Sule for being there.

Dedication

This Is For You, Kid Brother

Vitalis ‘Omosh’ Odero-RIP

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The Snob Estate

An unfavourable picture is the common currency of the private security guard. He is described as an ageing man formerly working as a security officer in the public sector, semi-illiterate, and poorly paid. His average age is between 40 and 60; he often works between 70 and 100 hours weekly and is prone to beg money from any passer-by stupid enough to give him a hint of a smile.

I don't fit into that description.

My name is Force Number 7017 Abu Malobs (Ok, Abraham Maloba from Mumias sub-county, Matungu, Emanane village). Villagers younger than me address me as Baba Oluchina, my age mates refer to me as *Mzee wa Eliza*. I am a professional security guard with Drive Today Security Services Limited and head

of manned security of Flamingo gated community, an affluent community consisting of 64 houses on the outskirts of Nairobi city. My stipulated mission at Flamingo estate is vague but constitutes within the gated community crime prevention, order maintenance, loss prevention, and protecting physical property, assets, and estate residents from theft, destruction, fire, or violence.

I stand at six feet, nothing in my socks, slightly paunchy at 45, but I still have a pleasant personality with an efficient, cultured manner of authority and politeness. I must add that I am also positive, straightforward, self-controlled, religious, charming, and diplomatic. My diplomatic skills and arresting presence have put me in good stead in the manned guard business.

I am smartly clad in a sky blue shirt, blue-black long trousers, military-style boots, and a sturdy blue belt with a uniform red stripe and a cap. Clothes maketh the man. The company’s logo is richly inscribed on the face of the cap and the shirt's sleeves

with the abbreviation for drive today Security services (DTSS). A blue pullover to be worn during the cold season and a blue-black overcoat for night duty complement the uniform. The sturdy belt has a truncheon fixed loosely on the side, and a pepper spray mace is tied to the rear of the belt. A maroon lanyard is looped on the left shoulder and holds a whistle, which is hooked to the inner flap of the front shirt pocket. I have two charges under me in the daytime, which doubles to four guards in the evenings.

With an average of 5 individuals per family in each house, the total population of the estate is close to 500 individuals; throwing in populations from the one-roomed let extensions and the live-in house helps. On average, each family owns a vehicle. You will realize that my role as the officer in charge of the six-person security team for the gated community is both demanding and delicate. The estate security headquarters is located at the gatehouse next to the estate gate. From there, we monitor, open, and record

all vehicles entering or leaving the estate in a book known as the occurrence book (OB). We are equipped with truncheons for enforcement and as our first line of defence. Additionally, we have pepper spray maces attached to our belts, which are strictly intended for use as a last resort against an adversary. An alarm backup switch in the guard room should provide backup in the form of added security and rifle-armed police within 12 minutes of sounding the alarm.

In my eighteen-month assignment in the estate, I have not used the mace or called the backup for any security reasons.

Whereas my immediate boss, the supervisor, makes daily checks in the evening, I am forced to work closely with my clients fronted by the estate management committee. This is imperative because our contracts are tied to the good will of the state; if, for any reason, they feel dissatisfied with our performance, then the security contract for the company is unlikely to be renewed with ensuing adverse consequences to the guards in the assignment.

This is of special significance in that we have, in a sense, close to 200 bosses, making it demanding to please this big lot every day, every time.

The manned security guard only dreams of job security.

The Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of Drive Today Security Services is a retired Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) Colonel struggling to make the outfit into a more professional guard force. The Colonel has strong faith in me; hence my eighteen-month sojourn in the estate. An attempt to redeploy me to other assignments led to an uproar from the residents, leading to the boss rethinking the move and instead promoting me to be the head of the estate security; therefore, I call the shots around here. I am in charge and here to stay.

The residents refer to us security guards as "Solja," which is a corruption of "Soldier." Sometimes, I believe they use this term in a derogatory manner. It doesn't matter; it puts bread on the table. As Solja, I am an expert on sitting down and

waiting. Solja always sits and waits; it is my lot as a security guard. Life is on a small scale, nothing to change the world or break any known global record.

A substantial part of my job, therefore, is claimed by boredom. Boredom is a complex phenomenon and, by and large, a product of repetition, but then that is life, for life's main medium is precisely repetition. One of my guards, in a bored moment, checked on his smartphone the various synonyms of boredom, and it brought in many aliases: anguish, ennui, tedium, the doldrums, humdrum, the blahs, and etcetera.

The security guard job has been my calling for the last twenty-one years, and I am now resigned to being a professional gateman with all the stereotypes attributed to it. It might be a humble and, in a way, risky calling, but then I find it strangely satisfying in a way. Maybe because it seems so undemanding, unfettered, and natural… also perhaps so lazy.

As a Solja, you become a fly on the wall as very few people notice your presence; on the other

hand, you become a man watcher, watching for things that aren't what they were and attempting to understand and find out why. A man watcher, therefore, sees so many underlying issues beyond the presented picture. When bored in a gated community of 64 dwellings, there is always something lively and exciting to watch.

Interestingly, the private security component in the country has a strong presence with consequent economic factors, as recent studies indicate that the country has well over 800,000 employees in the manned guard assignments only. The industry has more security employees than even the better-paid civil service.

Despite the security guards' much-needed service, our lot is much despised with the job regarded as a last resort after failing to secure any other opening. Our morale, therefore, is generally low, and many of us are not keen to be identified with the job. We have a host of challenges, and leading among them is insecurity; we, guards, are the first targets of

robbers and other criminals because we are considered as standing in the way of criminals as they seek to carry out their operations.

There are some special challenges also in manning a gated community. The residents look down on us. Today, human worth is dominantly a factor of task, and we from the residents and probably from the eyes of the world that we are of secondary importance to humanity; Children of a lesser god who ought to be treated like scum.

A case in point;

It is early, the clock reads 0630hrs on this cold Thursday morning, and a glistening, well-oiled car rolls slowly from inside the estate to the gate; we know the car. It belongs to a young female lawyer whose –Jurisprudence- If that is the correct word is never to talk or acknowledge Solja's presence. I dutifully opened the gate after my counterpart booked the car in the occurrence book (OB) register. Unlike every day, the vehicle grinds slowly to a halt, and the driver's window slowly rolls down, and the driver

looks through me. Her hair weave is perfectly in place, the earrings seem golden, and the red lipsticks on the lips are ravishing. She could be good if she wanted to. She maintains her gaze on the windscreen and forces herself to address me, clearly, by her calculation, a lesser mortal. She finally addresses the Solja almost with contempt enunciated in an almost oracular tone.

"Huyo Maid yangu asitoke kwa hii gate leo, Umesikia?"

The Solja has some public relations training and politely answers back.

"Sawa,Madam,Lakini wewe ni wa nyumba gani? Maid yako ni yupi..."

" Hujui hii gari? Kazi yako ni nini hapa?"

The Solja wisely quite knows that any word from him is likely to open another battle front. He keeps quiet. The window slides up, the automatic gear is engaged, and the vehicle on bank loan zooms off.

I sigh as I dutifully close the gate; After all, she went to school. I, Solja, went *through* school.

Jamin

Three weeks back, a new upstart was deployed under me in the estate. We started on a bad footing when he addressed me as “Papa.” Papa is a ne’er do well security officer in a comedy series on television. A strong, steady gaze from me which was meant to curdle him failed because when I mentioned that he should never dare call me that name again – he blurted out:

“Sawa Buda!”

I ignored that remark and still tried to impose my declining authority on him and the two other guards by stressing my 21 years’ experience on the job- he had mumbled:

"*Nijikute*," or directly succinct inference in English, *"Catch me doing that,"* – making the other guards scamper way in suppressed laughter.

Jamin Shihemi (He digitalizes it as She-Hay My) is a tall, gangly, rake-thin man with a withered caterpillar moustache. I suspect he had been born with that moustache. He is about 22 and has been in the security guard business for a mere four months. He was led into the compound early one morning to replace a night guard who had absconded after receiving his dues. At the heels of this new guard was a one-eared, one-eyed tick-infested mongrel named Diggy (Jamin, true to his Ikolomani background, pronounces it as Ticky). Diggy's tail is permanently tucked into the stomach and is presently a permanent guest in our guardroom, much to my chagrin. Jamin claims it gives a professional look to our hustle and points to that added canine security. I have conveniently kept quiet, making him think that he has won. Probably, but I am in charge and intend to put him in his place at the opportune moment.

I don’t know the origin of the name Jamin, but I personally don’t like him, nor do I like his mangy shadow. I have never liked them. Partly because he seems to look down on me because of my relatively lower education standards, and partly also – I suspect- because my “*mulika mwizi”* phone does not match his smartphone.

I particularly don’t like him because he doesn’t listen keenly to my instructions before acting on them and has casually mentioned to me that his uncle is a top official of the security workers' union. I have ignored that useless information as a poor attempt at name-dropping.

What, however, irritates me about this *Idakho* personality (*Idakho* is a clan within the Luhya) is his constant habit of having me round off his sentences for him. For example, whenever he comes late-which is often- he is bound to say:

“Pole, nimechele…?” kwa sababu nilipitia kumsalimia aunty ya...Or every lunch hour, he calls out:

"Nahisi njaa najisikia kula chaku….?"

Stupid man; very.

My annoyance with Jamin is also tied to his deep devotion to his smart phone and some dangling cords which he sometimes attaches to his ears. I confronted him on this issue, but his rejoinder was that he is a diploma student in security management at a college in town and uses the phone to "kookle" on his studies. I kept quite because I was not exactly sure what he meant by the term "Kookle".

But then, I also have to admit grudgingly that Jamin is probably getting value for his education.

A case in point: one of our assignment guards claimed to feel wretched but could not articulate what was wrong with his body. Jamin had, with doctors' precision, ruled out that the guard was suffering from a rare disease found mostly in people who were generally in a consistent and heightened state of anxiety. Jamin summed it up as Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and explained to us that rare sickness may be the most common ailment with

security guards who are working in very unsafe environments and where violence can be easily imposed on them by assailants seeing that they are as guards always have a feeling that they are in harm's way people suffering this ailment cannot concentrate, cannot set their worry and fears aside. Their lives become centred on their anxiety. This anxiety may eventually result in physiological problems with experiences of headaches, dizziness, heart palpitations, or insomnia.

Jamin was in his element as he outlined the difference between Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and General Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD –Jamin says -is a condition in which after experiencing trauma-and this is an event out of everyday routine-you may continue with your life. Still, essentially every time you remember the traumatic event, you relive it. The fear and shame you experience in such an event may haunt you for a lifetime, and each time can be as haunting and devastating as the first time.

The security guard is bound to experience some trauma, like when he experiences violence against him.

It is rarely appreciated, but hitting another person by using your fist or any weapon, including a firearm, can be a source of trauma, too. Solja, therefore, is bound to experience some level of trauma when he inflicts violence in the course of his duties.

Solja is also bound to experience violence in any manner in the course of his daily work, and it can also be traumatic when being investigated by police after an incident in the work place and appearing in our intimidating courts as a witness or as a suspect is also, in its way, extremely traumatizing.

GAD- Jamin adds- is a learned response to stress. A constant stress arising from being anxious that something untoward is headed your way. Solja, daily, especially in the night and silent hours, is anxious knowing that he is perennially in the line danger.

Jamin smiles maliciously and adds that the young Solja doing night duty has his circadian rhythm completely out of synch and, therefore cannot have a fulfilling sexual congress with his better half. So overnight, he broods, his imagination running riot as he imagines the young wife alone in bed at the *Kijiji.*

Jamin puts it so succinctly and maliciously that Chichi Omaga, a tall fellow guard, who was a one-time striker in the premier football league, walks away in protest, murmuring:

" *Unajua kuchoma!"*

Kuchoma indeed, but truth be told, there exists no therapeutic action in the security industry to assist the affected Solja for post-traumatic growth.

The Flamingo Estate Residents

The gated community has a population of 500, considering that the 64 houses have a family of five and servant quarters extensions are also occupied.

It is considered a high-cost community, and the residents have an illusion of being special on account of living in a privileged circle outside the unpleasantness and the nasty inconvenience vested in ordinary masses. Stress is a common thread that I am noticing running through the estate residents. They all seem overly stressed; stressed, I suspect, from their mortgaged lives, stressed from the never –never car loans, and even more stressed from their teenage offspring. Teenagers in the estate live large from their parents' accomplishments; they are vain and proud and live overly plastic lives. They demand much from

their parents under the mind set of parental "Entitlement,'' and they (Teenagers) don't want to move a muscle to meet their side of the bargain.

Tied to this, the youngsters are also lazy, bone lazy, with a misplaced sense of entitlement; and they are rude, extremely so, and very confrontational, hurling spiteful words for a perceived failing on the Solja's part.

Added to this, the stress factor is multiplied four-fold because a large fraction of the estate residents have acquired some snobbish attitudes.

Snobbishness, as I use the word, implies both an upward and a downward movement-A scramble upwards to emulate those whose position excels one's own and a look downwards on (or sometimes straight through) those less happily endowed than one's self. A true snob never has time to rest; There is always a higher goal to attain, and, by the same token, an increasing number of individuals—myself included—to look down upon with scorn.

The residents also seem perennially in a rush, seemingly having the duties of two lifetimes to accomplish in one life, and so they rush, rush, rush and never have time even to be companionable – never having time to fool away on matters that do not involve money and duty and business. No humanity.

I probably am being judgemental, seeing that while they are resting and romancing the families in the evening, I, Solja, remain out in the cold, building up my anxiety levels, as scholar Jamin would put it, waiting for anything un-toward to happen.

As pointed out, a Solja in a gated community is a man-watcher who has the advantage of being all-seeing without being noticed. From my experience, I find it easy to relate to the male estate owners. Consider this: Out of the 64 resident couples in the community, I have managed to exchange at least a nod to about 50 or so of the male species and maybe 10 of the womenfolk.

From my experience, the female species in the estate are to be avoided at all costs. They seem much

more overly stressed than their male folk, and Solja is incapable of putting a template to their reactions. A simple *"Jambo Madam*" on a Monday morning will get you a beautiful and smiling response of

" *Sijambo Solja, uko sawa?"*

Fast forward 24 hours later, Tuesday morning, everything else constant, the same "*Jambo Madam*" from Solja will earn you an explosive rejoinder double-barrelled, accompanied with a look capable of curdling Sulphuric acid.

"Madam kitu gani! Mimi ni Mama yako?"

Pray, who understands the daughters of Eve?

But it takes all to make a gated community. There is that former cabinet minister; in his heydays, he had been a political supremo, tall, well-assured, and had a marvellous dentist. Time is cruel; today, he looks like a shadow of his former television self. Bifocal, dentured, stooped, perennially on his balcony, watching the world pass by. At arm's length is a well-thumbed Bible- preparing for his finals, I suspect.

There is the retired military Colonel, a veteran from the Somalia theatre, and a CEO of another security company who every early morning goes for his morning jog at precisely 0848 hours and who, every Friday evening at exactly 6 minutes past midnight, staggers back from a nearby local. Very well done- to put it mildly.

And then there is my 78-year-old maternal uncle, a former Kenya Air Force officer…enough said…

There is the middle-aged psychiatrist lady doctor who obviously (I suspect) is her own patient, considering how her vehicle gets dented every other day. The good doctor is dressed in a flowery *Kitenge* every day of the year. What makes her stand out is, every morning, she eases her dented car and stops at the gate, and she then gazes keenly at Solja for a full minute with no words being exchanged until Solja starts fidgeting from the stare. She then drives off, whatever is in her mind- Who knows?

Jamin- our resident genius - described this good psychiatric lady's action as "vicarious traumatization," which he patiently described to us morons as a trauma-borne reaction from empathic engagement with traumatized clients. The good doctor is also mad from the many psychiatric cases he deals with daily. These cases have somewhat rubbed on her, leading to her un-explainable actions. It struck home and, fully explained why a cattle herder's reasoning is not much different from their four-legged charges.

And then there is the clown. He lives in house number 45, and we Soljas call him clown because of his manner of dressing, which deserves some description. The clown is a study in sartorial splendour. His Godfather hat, which I am yet to see him without, has a band around it resplendent with all colours of the rainbow. His white and black zebra-striped coat contrasts vividly with his blue shirt, which, together with a yellow tie and a carefully folded green handkerchief peeping from his breast pocket, gives him an ensemble effect. Black and white

sports shoes on his feet with red vertical stripes complete the dazzling costume. He is always magnificent, and considering it is hard placing his age-anything between 39 and 65-Makes him a joy to behold every day.

The clown has no car, is unmarried, and his occupation is unknown. Every Friday evening, though, as he enters the gate, He quietly summons a guard and whispers:

" ...Iko Vitu yangu itakuja house number 45"

And then he winks, placing a fifty-shilling note in Solja's hands before bursting out in a big laugh, which Solja conspiratorially heartily joins in. True to form, every Friday at about 9 PM, a taxi would drive in with a sweet young thing in the back seat requesting to visit house number 45.

As a Solja, I see so much more on early Saturday and Sunday mornings when the residents are generally indoors. What is now worrisome in my view and probably an emergent tragedy is our youth. Youngsters aged anything between 17-23 years are

engaged in a drinking binge and resultant crazy hangovers. Bhang smoking is now the accepted culture among the estate youth, and I suspect this is replicated across all the middle-class estates in the capital city.

It gets worse; the female teenager is also what the millennial call *Moto wa kuotea mbali*! The damsels of today are even much more confrontational and more prone to go physical than their male counterparts. They openly drink, smoke, and do drugs and are very dominant in their one-on-one relationship with their male counterparts. Something not so common back in my hometown of *Matungu*! Our urban young men - or boy child –Pronounced as *shauld* - have been emasculated!

A distressing incident happened on one Sunday morning, a case which, if reason had prevailed, could not have taken the direction it took. It was a Sunday Morning, and I handed over duties to the day guard without any reported incident.

House number 98 is a diplomat's house. The diplomat is abroad with the family, save for the daughter, who stays alone, studying at a foreign university that is based locally. We shall call her Lisa. The lady is a young adult and drives around in a Subaru saloon vehicle. Every other weekend, there is always a party in the house accompanied by loud music, and the neighbours come to Solja to ask him to talk to her to reduce the noise.

Later in the day, at about 11 O'clock, Lisa's Subaru car approached the gate from inside the estate, except that, in this instance, it was an unidentified young man driving; naturally, the guard stopped him and politely asked him to have the known owner of the vehicle, in this case, Lisa, clear with him before the car could drive out of the estate. The young man obliges politely, dials his mobile phone, and talks to Lisa.

It takes less than a minute, and soon Lisa is seen striding purposefully towards the gate accompanied by two other male friends and a lady.

Lisa is (the guard says) dressed in a way she shouldn't be and is shouting in the American idiom:

"I wanna kick me some ass."

Her voice is shrill and loud as she walks directly to the guard, jabbing him in the chest with a manicured finger, calling him a bit of everything wicked. Her adjectives are rich, horrifying, and extremely vulgar.

She then turns around open-handed, slams the bonnet of the car in anger, and turns to the guard, shouting:

"*… It will take you a lifetime from your starvation wages to make a down payment for this machine…"* She declares.

"You loser," She adds.

The tirade goes on for two full minutes while the guard admirably keeps his peace. The noise is so loud that the ordinarily passive and supposedly added security dog –Diggy – starts progressively whining and, later, yelping loudly.

Lisa suddenly stopped in mid-sentence as if she was spent, turned around, and walked back to the house with her acolytes following her.

If only the guard had struck her or even made a visible attempt to push her out of his personal space, it would have been all systems going. Lisa, I imagine, would have theatrically gone down and later pulled out the woman card of being weak, defenceless, frail, and incapable of hurting anything by word or deed. Society would have believed her, entirely supporting her and absolving or stripping her of all responsibilities for her behaviour.

She is only twenty, and in a year or two, in a moment of weakness, some hardworking, honest, loving boy child would slip a ring on her finger and claim to love her "*till death do us part."*

And death to that young man will surely come fast.

Following the incident, a few days later, the director of DTSS, the estate committee, and yours truly held a virtual meeting with the parents of Lisa

over the incident. Lisa refused to come to the meeting when summoned.

A decision was arrived that the parents of Lisa would offer an apology on her behalf, and monetary reparation of Kenya shillings 10,000 was arrived at. However, the guard on duty on the material day was to be reassigned out of the estate to another deployment. The guard admirably refused to take money.

We Soljas heartily commended the slighted Solja -Richard Nyakoma- for refusing the offered blood money.

We, too, Soljas have our pride.

It is not my call, but this country needs to study and classify the smoking of bhang as a national disaster. This country also needs to study and rescue the teenage male species from the rising dominance of the female species.

If you are a keen observer of the country's direction, you will notice that the power dynamics have subtly changed in favour of the female gender. A

massive disrespect is emerging for boys and men throughout our society.

Jamin, our resident genius, referred to the appalling episode as learned helplessness.

We, Soljas, helplessly looked at him for an explanation. Jamin took time to explain to us:

"Learned helplessness," he said, *"is when a person cannot find resolutions to complex situations – even when a situation is accessible."*

We looked helplessly lost.

"In the above scenario," Jamin continued, *"the estate committee was suffering from a learned helplessness situation in that they knew that Lisa had obviously erred in her conduct and overreaction, but then their hands were tied. You just could not run her out of the estate especially so when the parents are out of the country and at the same time are your peers."*

The Solja in question also suffered from learned helplessness- he could have physically assaulted the lady to stop him from embarrassing him,

he could have resorted to using the truncheon or the mace, but then he knew that a biased society would not understand his action. Besides, he had a job to keep and did not have the financial muscle to even resort to legal action. So he remained quiet as his dignity was eroded and rubbed to the ground.

"*Do we soljas suffer from this condition?"* one of his colleagues asked.

"*Indeed we do,"* Jamin replied with enthusiasm. *"You see,*" he continued, "*this condition occurs when a person who has experienced challenges comes to believe that he has no control over the situation and, therefore, gives up trying to make changes and accepts his fate. The average security guard is a person in a permanent state of unresolved traumatic issues. He works in conditions that require constant alertness and tension; he is underpaid and works in unprofessionally managed companies lacking institutional structures. But what options does he have?"*

Jamin asked us. We keep quiet. Jamin looked at the guard with a lopsided grin and added:

"*My friend, you have learnt your lesson. She is capable of doing the same again to you or another man because women invariably mistake the politeness and restraint of menfolk against them as a right,"*

He saw that we did not understand him. "Put it this way," Jamin continued, *"Most women will affect an air of capriciousness and frailty when it suits them. In other words, a woman's greatest strength is her weakness."*

Professor Jamin is now in his element.

"*…and if that direction fails, then they will resort to the most common appeal,"* Jamin says with a suppressed chortle.

"Bottom power"

Elephants Making A Baby

It is about midnight, a cold night, and I and five other guards are crouched next to the fire by the gate; Jamin is dwelling on his pet subject of owning a security company in the next five years. *"Impossible, you don't have the finances to pull it off."* One of us, the tall guard Chichie Omaga, pours water on his ambition.

" *Kuwa na Imani,"* Jamin retorts, "*I have done my research, and these are my findings."*

He then tables his findings as outlined from his phone.

"*The manned guard security business employs about 800,000 men and women nationally; that is more than all organic government security officers in*

the country from the KDF to the national youth service, so there is enough space for every investor."

Jamin takes a deep breath and continues,

"*You need a minimum of 25 Guards to break even in the business. You need office space and equipment, two supervisors, one vehicle, at least one motorbike, and a driver. So overall, you need a staff of 30 in your first month."*

Jamin then tabulated the financial breakdown of starting a security firm:

Description	**Cost (Ksh)**
Kitting of 25 guards (Pair of full uniform, pullover, cap, mace, truncheon, lanyard, belt, and whistle)	500,000
Security vehicle and motorbike	500,000
Office premise, staff and three months' rent	600,000
Marketing, insurance licenses, legal, website	300,000
Total	**1,900,000**

We laughed.

Jamin was not done. "*It gets worse financially,"* he says.

"Once you get an order, it takes an average of three months in the industry before your clients consider paying you. So it means you need to maintain the office and pay your guards and office staff for at least three months before getting your first pay cheque.

We laughed as he ignored us. He swallowed hard and continued:

"A guard earns an average of 12,000; the rest of the staff should earn an average of 30,000. So, monthly pay averages 400,000, which, when extrapolated for three months, translates to 1,200,000.

"Not to mention K9," he adds. Harrison Ngaiywa – an experienced guard formerly in Nakuru, asks Jamin the meaning of K9.

Jamin explains that the K9 is the operational term for Canine, which is the use of dogs in the

security industry. He explains that K9, while important, is extremely expensive to maintain and therefore left in the provinces of top-tier Private security companies (PSC). Hiring a K9 and handler would be charged at about 15,000 for 24 hours.

"How much would your dog, Diggy cost, for example?" Harrison presses on, tongue in cheek.

Jamin glances at Harrison and continues deadpan:

"*With proper training, as a K9 dog, Ticky should be equivalent to about five of* you*."*

We Soljas look askance at him and remain silent.

He continues with the calculation and announces that the total, therefore, stops at Ksh.3, 100,000

We laughed again. Chichie Omaga, stifling deep laughter, asks him:

" *Hii pesa utatoa wapi"*

Jamin remained serious, only muttering:

" *Kila kitu kwa imani!"* and angrily strode away to do a patrol of the estate, Diggy, his most loyal acolyte, at his heels.

We ignore him and continue with a range of discussions as we warm ourselves on the fire. Jamin strolls back after about half an hour and I notice that the rest of the guards unconsciously create space for him, unreservedly accepting him as their leader. The discussion has been on us guards being issued firearms.

"*No way!* " Jamin takes over the discussion. *"The government security machinery cannot accept that arrangement."*

"*But neighbouring Uganda has firearms for their security guards?"* Another guard points out.

*"The security dynamics of these two countries are a whole lot different, "*Jamin says and continues, *"Of course, eventually the security regulatory authority will have guns issued but only for the top tier security companies which have shown to have dedicated and well-paid guards and have assignments*

in specifically sensitive locations or maybe cash in transit."

"What about us? "Harrison Ngaiwa asks, *"Are we not trained enough?"*

Jamin laughs loud and long and answers Harrison, *"Not your Busaa swirling kind and your chaotic living in the Kijiji."*

We look crestfallen; I suspect we already were compiling ideas on how we could use the weapons to get rich quickly.

But Jamin is emphatic: *"Official handling of firearms is not kids play, hapana mchezo!"* In Swahili, he adds, *"The training takes long, your mental state has to be continuously reviewed, you have to periodically test fire the weapons for currency and you need special storage facilities and all that stuff- Do you think DTSS can meet all that?"*

We regretfully agree with him, but then another jolly Guard built like a brewer named Basil asks:

"Do *you see the SRA assisting in improving our terms of service and raising our wages?"*

Jamin Shakes his head. "Look," he says, *"SRA has its hands full and is only playing for the international gallery to show that the country has adopted the best practices in the industry. Its services, therefore, are mainly likely to cater for the upper tier of security establishments. If they insist on the strict standards down the chain, then they are bound to disrupt the existing but sensitive security architecture."*

We are all quite trying to absorb his words.

"*The day the high standards of SRA are adopted by the guard at Elurambi Primary School in my home area. I will give you 10,000 Shillings."*

"Utatoa wapi, mia yangu hujalipa, Fuliza pia hulipi?" This is from Harrison Ngaiwa.

Jamin gives him an ugly look.

"So what then does the SRA do?" Basil asks

Jamin serves us an anecdote:

"SRA is like two elephants making a baby: it is done at high levels, with plenty of energy and loud noise, and it takes a very long time to see the result!"

We laughed.

Jamin was not finished with the SRA.

"*SRA is housed on the 14th floor in the CBD and has exceptional security arrangements with well-armed administration Police officers guarding the office premises."* Jamin paused and continued:

"If the SRA itself does not have faith in us, the security guards, to guard their fourteenth-floor office, whom can we go to?''

We laughed.

The Estate Meeting

It is another week, and my boring, repetitive job continues. I open the estate gates and close them. I walk around patrolling the estate and finally retire back to my base at the gate, sitting, waiting, and watching. My colleague, Jamin Shihemi, is on leave; hence, I have a new colleague. Short, forty, bald, approximately 30 years old , and always sweating. He answers to the name –Baraza- (What name did you expect?) Baraza, from my calculation, is unlike Jamin -not going to amount to anything much. He talks too much and is too eager to please everyone.

Baraza's last assignment was night-guarding a shop in the Central Business District (CBD). Assignments in the Central Business districts, while risky, are also considered very juicy from Solja's

perspective; Juicy in the sense that the big human traffic also means there are faster ways to make some extra coin.

"Angalia hii gari, mimi narudi."

A motorist would say leaving you clamping fifty shillings in the hand for your non-taxable duties. That's not bad, considering that five cars in an evening cover up for your daily transport and maybe for a plate of *chips mwitu.*

Baraza is likely to be an issue in the long run. His uniform dirty and ill-fitting, his hair unkempt, his boots torn, and he also talks too much. He also, twice in the week, came to work smelling of cheap drinks common in the slum area where he lives. As his senior, I tried to talk to him about these habits, but then he was like all his clansmen from *Kabras* -too wise to listen, he thinks rules are made for others to follow, not him.

Sooner or later, Baraza is bound to rub the estate committee the wrong way with not-so-good consequences to the security company and, yours

truly. I have made a mental note to point this out to the supervisor when he makes his rounds this evening.

The estate chairman, Timothy Miigwa, a top executive with the power company, finally managed to cajole the residents to attend a meeting designed to have the residents bond and discuss some emerging challenges within the estate. The meeting was held under the only big tree in the estate, with residents coming over with their plastic seats. My boss, the proprietor of the security company, was also invited, and I, attended as head of estate physical security.

The estate chair talked with his customarily sweet reasonableness. The first issue on the agenda dwelt on the estate security arrangement; most residents were behind on their security payments. It was the wrong number one agenda.

"*My house is guarded by the blood of Jesus Christ,"* one much saved resident intoned, *"Therefore, I have no plans to make payment for worldly security,"* he added. "*After all, I have a mansion in heaven."*

His manner and bearing while delivering his edict is so solemn as if he has an unshakeable belief in what he is saying. He makes me think of an old Testament prophet.

"Before we discuss this security issue, we must discuss the issue of keeping hens in the estate. My neighbour at house 62 is keeping a cock that constantly crows in the night, and I can't sleep. What is your view, chair?'' A lady butted in.

The chair was diplomatic and asked the owner of house 62 to comment.

The owner of house 62, a big man with a baritone voice, took his time to answer,

"The Cock crows in my house and not in house number 63, and besides, in my culture, we don't discuss issues of Mboga hivi hivi."

A Mzungu resident married to one Wairimu and who boasts a smattering of Swahili language asked loudly,

"Mboga is vegetables, isn't it? Why has he mentioned vegetables here?"

The Solja succeeded in keeping a straight face.

"Single ladies are spoiling this estate," said a lady whose husband is reputed to have roving eyes. "*We residents are to ensure that we don't have single ladies in our servants' quarters, and I want the estate security to enforce this!"* She shouted.

"The security guards are busy seducing our housemaids and don't bother with their duties. Therefore, unless we get a more professional outfit, I have no plans to pay these guards".

In a sense, I plead guilty to the first part of the sentence but dissociate myself entirely from the remaining part of the statement. What, however, makes the statement incredulous is that this particular resident has never bothered to make any security payments.

Another resident, an individual with a stuttering challenge, also had his say:

"*I Ha…ve… my… my dog Sii….mba… to guard me, therefore I won't pay for se…..cu….rity!"*

I, Solja, was having a hard time keeping a straight face.

"That dog is too noisy in the night. We can't sleep at night," a resident chimed in.

Simba's stammering owner pointedly kept quiet. Too much effort, I supposed.

Many residents stayed mute, not offering or supporting any of the expressed opinions.

The meeting did not move beyond the first agenda, dragging on and ending late with not much being achieved.

Two weeks later, we, the estate security, were handed a list of vehicles we were supposed to ignore and not to bother to open the gate for as they had refused to make the monthly security payments.

We maintained this for four to five days only to realise that most of these defaulters would come to the gate, walk out from their cars forcibly open the gates after giving us a withered look or churning some stormiest epithets against us. Throw open the gates

and drive in or out without bothering to lock the gates back.

The lady psychiatrist was the nerve breaker; she appeared at the gate, and I dutifully informed her of the position as directed by the estate committee. She looked at me for a full minute and finally nodded in understanding, switched off the car's engine, loudly raised the car handbrake, and adjusted the car seats before proceeding to apparently getting engrossed in a book in her possession.

Five minutes or so later, ten other vehicles had queued behind her; minutes later, the estate was deafened by impatient horns blaring. The lady doctor seemed unperturbed in all this, and Solja, knowing when he was beaten, dutifully opened the gate.

It is hard dealing with people. I wonder why sane people fight to be in positions of leadership.

Coins For The Solja

It is sad, but the pay levels in the security industry nationally remain low despite the growing skill levels of the private security guard.

The Solja normally gets his meagre pay on some diverse dates ranging from the 8th to the 15th day of the month. As a general rule of thumb, we get paid late in the month for a variety of reasons; the most plausible reason, at least from the perspective of the management, is that if you pay the guard early, he is likely to go absent without official leave (AWOL) seeking greener pastures with another outfit. Paying us mid-month has its major advantage of holding us in place as Solja is unlikely to change or get a job opening mid-month. It also reduces the possibility of us guards absconding from our duties because of the

money the management owes. Late payment is also attributable to the late payment by the estate residents.

It is important to point out that five tiers of security companies operate in the country. The first tier is Private Security Companies (PSC) tied to global standards, with the companies having international networks. Such PSCs provide services mostly to commercial enterprises with international connections like the United Nations agencies, colleges, and banking institutions. They employ over one thousand Private security guards (PSG) supervised a big pool of management professionals, and their emoluments are tied to international standards.

Tier two is PSC, which is well established with its services extending to the regional outlets. They maintain a professional outlook and have a big pool of middle management workers as former national security service employees. Their recruitment and training are well regulated, and they are also involved in the provision of physical security to corporate outfits and in Bullion escorts.

The third tier belongs to the local outfits with local ownership and is mainly involved in manned security for small business enterprises and gated estates. Their Guard force numbers fall between 100-600. Their entrepreneurship extends into private and insurance investigations, debt collection, car tracking, intruder alarm connections, close escort, event coverage, and canine support. While mainly rudimentary, their training is efficient on account of longevity, completion, and experience. Most Tier Three outfits are co-owned by a group of directors, with the day-to-day running of the outfit left to retired security officers. A big fraction of the security outfits in the country belong here.

The fourth tier has a manned guard force of less than 100; these tiers are mainly made up of struggling entrepreneurs, either family-owned or sole proprietorship. Like the third tier, they, too, are mainly involved in manned guarding and other entrepreneurial efforts geared toward the security arena. Their difference from the third tier is mainly in

size. Their recruitment and guard training is also questionable and has a significant turnover of guards due to perceived low pay and less-than-perfect working conditions.

The fifth tier is the last one, probably the bedrock of the security industry. It is a single guard providing services to the local primary school or secondary school paid for by the school board of governors. (BOG). Or perhaps guarding the home of a wealthy individual and being paid directly by the employer. This lot works hard and dangerously, wanting nothing because they expect nothing.

Drive Today Security Services, I suppose, falls in between the third and fourth tier, where most of the security companies in the country fit in. A common strand running through them is that they are local, with comparatively reasonable start-up capital compared to international standards. The directors –or owners- have the book knowledge on security garnered from having worked in the organic country's security apparatus like the army, police or the

paramilitary. Others have gained a working knowledge of security, having acquired the skills while employed at some supervisory or management level in the industry.

Despite this, we strive because we know the value of money; unlike you, we have a big respect for the coin. You toss a coin to me, considering it is next to nothing, and I graciously pocket it. It isn't anything; it is a unit of exchange that builds up, adds up, appreciates, and so we save slowly, indeed, daily. And we show for it. There have been guards who have not touched their salaries for even five years, yes, five! Relying entirely on the –what you call- small hand-outs.

But some are also extreme. Several guards on night assignments within the CBD opt to save the transport and rent by spending their daytime hours sleeping at Uhuru Park before heading back to their assignments in the evening; Funny, but then it happens.

My present sidekick, Baraza, has also learnt the value of money. There is not a very sorrowful person like Baraza when he is parting with money even when paying for a meal he has consumed.

As Jamin would painfully point out, in other professions, superior ability and dedication are rewarded with promotion, power, prestige, perks, and pay. Corporate honchos call that the five "P"s.

The "P"s don't exist beyond the second-tier security outfits. If anything, because some are family-owned, decisions like promotions and even sackings may be made at dinner tables or at the whims of the boss, depending on his relationship with the client. The client puts in a good word for you, the boss is pleased, and it trickles down to you. The client is not pleased with your service (more often, the client's spouse) and complains to the supervisor; well, then, no explanation is demanded. Your assignment is, at best, changed or, at worst, merely terminated.

The pay is indeed meagre, but somehow, we manage to survive and, truth to say, very well. There

is always some bit of money for the Solja. A good "*hello*" from me as I open the gates sometimes lands me some 50 shillings. You send me a newspaper across the road in a significant currency; you should not expect change. Would You? A servant quarter is vacated, and I go out of my way to show you and broker one for you ... Your maid has absconded; you need a maid quickly...just a token commission, sir.

Indeed, in the informal settlement where I live, I am the person to go to when you need an opening as a domestic worker. I keep tabs on them and liaise with the adjoining Soljas of the estate, and should there be an opening, I immediately send word to you and sweetly talk to your potential new employer positively about your (very) good qualities. And once employed, it is only fair that we share almost half of your first pay, seeing that, I secured a job for you and would remain your guarantor to your employer as long as you are employed. On average, these arrangements boost my meagre salary in a big way. It gets better. As long as you are employed in the estate, I am assured

of a ready cup of tea and a slice of bread to go with it when the bosses are out ‘slaving’. And once, yes, only once, a liberal dose of affection- if you know what I mean.

A car in the estate is another source of wealth for us humble guards. Because we know you want the car always clean. Therefore, even without your say-so, I ensure that every car parked in the estate gets a rubdown early in the morning to make it distinguished for your rounds in town. Every morning, the night security is paid an average of Ks. 500 from washing the estate cars, which we share daily, and despite what you think, the simple coins take a Solja far.

But despite all this, Solja's biggest ambition is to be promoted to the Supervisors position. It does not mean that the salary gets catapulted, no, but then this is where the money starts rolling in; not precisely honest money, but money nevertheless. A supervisor is usually given his area of operation and can relocate the guard to any other assignment without seeking upward authority. This, in essence, makes the

supervisor a very powerful line manager in his own right.

As an officer in charge of this assignment, I make daily reports to the control room or as appropriate, and the control room informs the supervisor of any untoward happenings; common of these cases is a guard failing to report for duty or even reporting to duty while drunk. In such scenarios, the supervisor would pick a standby guard as a replacement and personally dispatch him to the assigned location. This ensures that the assignment is adequately covered and serves as insurance to the client. There were also some unlikely cases where a client would raise a complaint for any number of reasons against a guard, even in the silent hours of the night, forcing the supervisor to react to the situation as appropriate.

As a daily routine, the supervisor does his rounds in his allotted area of operation in the early evenings or early mornings.

DTSS's best assignment from the Soljas perspective is a manned guard assignment at the leafy parts of the city. Here is a well-guarded compound with a strong outer perimeter wall, well-lit, a perfect guard room, and a secure gate manned by six guards from DTSS. An inner perimeter live fence with a strong gate manned by another outfit dressed, night or day, in black suits and wraparound sunglasses; two Alsatian canines complement the security effort.

At the centre, secured from direct observation, is a grand multi-storey house with a large space for parking and –so we hear- a heated Olympic-style swimming pool. None of the uniform guards from our outfit has ever been allowed into the sacred sanctuary.

Owned by a good-natured, very pretty, and enchanting lady named Meg Tivihi, it is a place for victimless crimes. The highlight is on Friday evening when young ladies personally drive in the early evening in well-maintained sedans. No taxis here online or otherwise and definitely no Boda Bodas! No siree.

Late at night, close to midnight, heavier cars with big engines roaring start rolling in and speed directly to the inner compound. At about 4 a.m., when the world is silent again, the two dozen big engines roar out again, apparently satiated from the nocturnal activities. The ladies in their small cars zoom off much later or endeavour to spend the day in the location for a repeat experience that repeats itself like clockwork on Saturday again.

As a general rule, as the ladies leave in the morning and again as an unwritten rule give the Solja on duty manning the gate, an amount shared later by the Soljas, a token amount of Ksh.500 without fail. It gets better, every Sunday morning, an aide to the Madam presents a token of Ksh. 3000 each to the six Soljas who have spent the weekend in place. So, in essence, every Sunday morning, the Solja is richer by between 3000 to 5000 shillings – a stunning sum for the simple Solja. But then, it is also a general rule that every solja has to part with at least Ksh. 500 as a gift

to the supervisor to ensure he maintains you in that soft assignment.

My present supervisor is a stocky man in his mid-thirties, clever, competent, a womaniser, and reputedly has a big appetite for some extra, not necessarily clean money.

He would normally drive to my assignment in the company vehicle, park it, and stay in the car. This is done, I suspect, to ensure that the proper pecking order is maintained. I then would be forced to walk over to the vehicle, where, seated in the passenger's seat, he would initiate and lead the discussion on the assignment.

"*Tuko na shida ya torch, hazifanyi mzuri,"* I tell him just for the sake of it.

"*Iko na shida gani,"* he would ask.

"*Nafikiria ni sababu zimetoka China tu,"* I would say.

"Tutaona hiyo, " he would say and ask if there was another burning issue.

"*Battery ya torch, pia imekwisha,"* I would say this is to ensure that he at least earns his pay.

I know he would do nothing, but the next time he appears again, I would broach the issue of the batteries again.

And so it goes.

Twice, he had casually mentioned to me:

"*Kuna ka assignment, ambayo iko mzuri sana, tena ni ya mchana na contract ni ya miaka tatu, sijui kama ungependa?"* He had asked.

" *Ningependa sana boss…"*

" *Kwa hivyo…."* He let the question hang, the insinuation clear.

It meant that if I played ball, meaning a "donation" of my entire first salary, he would work on my relocation.

I later took a rain check on his offer, preferring to remain in the present assignment.

He laughed and jokingly asked if I loved fish and chips!

I understood what he inferred; the assignment of fish and chips is an unpopular assignment in the city's central business district where a tough no, nonsense owner of several fast food joints in the CBD insists that the Solja must join in the marketing effort calling on passers-by to enter the joint for meals. So you will find Solja in uniform with his truncheon in one hand, calling out like a *manamba* :

"*Chips! Chips! Chips na sausage!"*

Not exactly my cup of tea.

The only consolation is that when the joint closes late in the evening, Solja is assured of some extra large portion of freshly packed Chips, no sausage, of course.

Jamin, our resident genius, has labelled the experience as a role conflict. A situation where circumstances force an individual to get into a role you are not trained or psychologically prepared for.

Cases abound in the manned guard industry where clients force the guards to get involved in

personal errands outside their terms of reference. Gardening and washing cars come to mind.

Some female guards- guardettes- in numerous cases have been coerced under the pain of losing their jobs into housemaids and domestic workers.

Talking of guardettes, our area supervisor has a not-so-rosy reputation for using his influence to try to be cosy with some guardettes.

Laughingly, he had been heard to whisper some loving words to the beautiful wife of a guard:

" *Bwana ni Mzuri ametosha promotion, bibi ndio mbaya-hatakii Bwana mazuri…"*

Frank I Am Talking To You!

It was a quiet week again, save for some two incidents. The first was a domestic altercation

between a husband and wife, which we rushed to look into as a matter of course but did not get involved, seeing that it was an issue that was purely domestic. It was a good break. The couple had settled in the estate some six months back and appeared to be a loving couple. They were yet to be blessed with an offspring. The lady's sister is at college in town and also stays with them. The live-in sister got in the family way, and the loving husband was responsible. Hence the noisy squabble.

The noise reached a towering crescendo, and I rushed in to check, pushing open the door with Baraza, my assistant, close. Our *Rungus* held at the ready. Four or five residents were at the gate, yet to summon the courage to enter.

I pushed the door and entered and found ourselves in a very emotionally charged situation.

The supposedly meticulous house was in disarray and shambles, with a television and laptop on the floor smashed to smithereens. Books and papers were strewn all over, and an expected sumptuous meal

consisting of spaghetti and chicken was all over the expensive three-inch-thick carpet.

I had known this couple since they had moved into the estate. The lady worked in a local broadcasting station while the husband- a tall, jovial, easy-smiling man was a man about town.

The lady of the house was standing rigid in the centre of the room, a high-heeled shoe in her right hand held in a very aggressive posture. She was obviously out of control with a look of such acrid, unrelenting anger. The anger seemed to charge the air with static as if her presence could generate sparks. She was exquisitely packed in jeans, trousers, and open yellow slippers, but her mouth dripped profanity. Her body frame was big and had beef in the right places. A body that my friend Jamin Shihemi would call *Kienyeji* in that very rare moment of genius.

Her younger sister standing in a corner –an accomplice in the bedroom gymnastics -was slim and an arrestingly beautiful girl but now looked rounded

with a fearful expression on her face; her throat moved convulsively as if she was about to be sick.

"*You nauseate me, Frank Joko!"* The lady of the house was shouting, her words all enunciated very clearly in a loud, staccato voice:

"Am I to believe that your tiny, puny, pathetic dongle could impregnate my sister?" She *shouted*

"You are a slimy, putrid blob of spit!" She added.

"Frank! I am talking to you."

Frank Joko– Or shall we now call him Romeo- was seated at the edge of a sofa, looking subdued. He looked up, seeing us as a sort of plea from a glazed and mesmerised eye; there were some little twitches in the muscles of his face. He looked smaller than his actual size. He looked down at his hands, a weary tolerance, with all his attention directed at his little finger. I wondered if it reminded him of something equally small.

I coughed to announce our presence.

The lady of the house turned around and glared at us, her face contorted akin to Dracula's. And that lady could string English words.

Unakanyaga carpet ya nani! She barked at us, sub-consciously reverting to the use of Swahili probably on account of our perceived status as lesser beings.

"Get *out of my house, you clot!* She shouted. "*Stick to your class! You Sassenach Baboons!"*

She turned around, grabbed a bowl of soup, and threw it towards us, smashing on the wall three inches from the ducking head of Baraza.

We slithered out of the house, the insult ringing in our ears.

Jeez, Baraza muttered".

"*...Umeona vile chakula imemwagwa?* "

I kept quiet, but I agreed with Jezebel in one respect. I will stick to my class; my class is not a tiny, pathetic dongle. I boast a *Tarimbo!*

In retrospect, I was happy about the incident because our reaction to the incident looks good on the

company's OB, where I will ensure it is spelt out in a very compelling language with our reaction and bravery not to be doubted.

However, Jamin was aghast when he heard that we security guards had entered the house.

"*You must never do that again, boss*,'' he told me. "*The house, despite what was happening, had personal space*," he explained. *"What you should have done is to knock and wait until invited in."*

"There was enough commotion, Jamin. Suppose somebody was dying in the house?" I countered him.

"Nobody died,'' he answered back. He informed me *that private property and rights are sacrosanct, and you, as a security guard, must respect them. Even fire-fighters have a set of legal parameters to follow before storming a building on fire."*

He saw that I was crestfallen with the incident and later quietly approached me, mentioning that the case was an issue of role conflict too because if I had stormed the house and found the couple locked in

fighting, what was the security guard expected to do? And what could have been the recriminations of such action?

I kept quiet as the separation of a fighting couple was not in my training module.

After this conversation, I suddenly started looking at Jamin from different lens. This young man could go far. I even realised that we could be relatives not exactly by blood but are, in a sense, relatives by marriage!

Solja Gets Spiritual

I was well brought up in the Christian faith. I converted late in life to the catholic faith because I found that the Catholic Church is governed by authority. In contrast, the Protestants are governed by private judgement where every loud pastor creates his own morals and is ready to alter them as he deems fit. I also came to accept that the Catholic Church is orderly and practices the organised universal truth sustained by over two thousand years of history. But then, I don't have that unreasonable conviction of the converted zealot.

The following three accounts are my narration tied to my Catholic faith.

The Catholic Nun

Solja is very religious, seeking spiritual nourishment when not on duty. The last Sunday, Solja found himself in a Catholic Church and, yes, got carried away with a Bui bui-clad choir leader in the church.

She was a nun, a Catholic nun, and it was hard not to notice her; she was tall for a lady and dressed in the grey habit of her order, and she was conducting the choir adjacent to the altar while also singing loudly and as she sang, I noticed the very perfect teeth, long neck and incredible eyebrows. Her face was relatively calm, remotely smiling, and from her composure, you could readily see that she was quite at ease with her calling. She was a nun, probably in her thirties; yes, leading a choir at a holy place. A creation

of God living her calling, a holy calling but still candy to the eyes.

As I had pointed out, you could not fail to notice her. Her grey habit was made to measure and fitted her perfectly, ending an inch below the knees. Her headscarf, meant to cover the head, was short, maybe three or four inches short of the forehead, exposing-conveniently, I suspect a weave. She had glasses on resting just above the nose; they were golden-Pince-nez, her watch too seemed golden, not the poor imitation so common on our streets - I suspect-pure gold. Probably of presidential standards described by clever Jamin as a "*Lange & shone Saxonia moon phase luxury'' watch* whose purchase price could set you back by about 100,000 shillings.

The mass was over. The choir had been splendid, the preaching touching. The faithful filed out, and again, I could not help noticing the nun chatting with the rest of the faithful. After a time, she peeled from the chatting group and moved over to a parked vehicle nearby. It was a beautiful, gun-metal-

coloured V-6 harrier saloon. It was a state-of-the-art, fuel churner, roomy, latest-in-the-market vehicle. She jumped into the vehicle, and I noticed the shoes, not the traditional sandals so common with her lot. This looked well fitted, Italian, hand-crafted leather, and made to measure.

The nun expertly adjusted the car seating and mirrors before starting the engine and driving off. I remained standing mesmerized and wondering.

Solja is left wondering whether the world has converted Christianity.

The Ruffian And The Cross

The Khamseen is an oppressive and strong desert sandstorm that is experienced in Israel and the Levant. It is strongest in April and May, sometimes lasting up to three hours, enveloping the entire countries in the Levant with very fine sand, giving the environment an eerie kind of darkness even at noon.

The Khamseen was blowing on Friday, the third day of April in 33 AD.

It was also the day Jesus Christ was crucified.

The seven days that heralds the most holy week for the Christian calendar spells the hours leading to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, a central figure in human history. It is a solemn period full of symbolism and outward signs of penitence, fasting, alms giving, and personal surrender.

On Good Friday, Solja, a Catholic, had an off day and joined his local faithful in enacting the tribulations of Jesus Christ from the procurator Herod's open courtroom to the crucifixion grounds of Golgotha. Catholics call it the Way of the Cross. The crowd was big at 1500-2000 people, and the snaking way of the cross route took the faithful across the town.

As the faithful continued with the way of the cross along the town streets, people on their routine duties took time to look at this group of Christians and, after a minute or two, lost interest and continued with their routine and chores. The faithful plodded on and rounded a corner; Solja could not help noticing a stranger along the path. He was a big man, rough, bearded, with a craggy face clad in dirty Jeans and a black shirt. He was casually leaning on a post with a smoking cigarette dangling from his lips; shamelessly, he kept looking around as if waiting for anything to happen. By his dress and looks, he easily passed off as

the kind of person you would not be comfortable meeting alone in any alley, day or night.

The Solja's mind silently labelled him as "Ruffian."

As the Cross adherents snaked by singing loudly, the Ruffian straightened up, removed his cap, and in the same motion, also removed the dangling cigarette from his mouth and stubbed it using his fingers. The ruffian then lowered his head as a sign of respect and surprisingly made a perfect sign of the cross as the chanting Catholic entourage passed.

It was enough for Solja. The quest of God cannot be hidden; it rises deep from the lowest depth of the soul.

It rose for this ruffian.

Another spiritual experience…

The Hustler

Permit me, a second, to air my pride as I believe it has a bearing on what I am about to say. I am in my late forties, a vainglorious civil servant, driving a fine car and with good career prospects. Am also a devoted Catholic.

It was Easter Sunday, the highest point of the Christian faith. I was in church, seated in the pews together with about a dozen others, the service ongoing. He was next to me and I noticed him because of the big baritone voice. He sang in splendour, his voice dominating, subduing the rest of us on the pew.

I stole a glance at the face behind the voice. He was tall with a rough scrawny face, with matted beards, His teeth were bad. At a glance, the man's

attire and bearing clearly loud that he was a manual worker, an odds-job wage-earning man. A hustler; a man you would be uncomfortable bumping into in the shady localities of the town. The service went on, with the hustler's voice dominating proceedings in the pew with his open holiness and rejoinders to the priest.

The collection basket came over. I surreptitiously dropped in a modest amount as my offering, the hustler like every other faithful in the pew did likewise. I could not help noticing what the hustler had dropped in the collection box. It was double the amount I had offered to the lord. I stole a confirmatory glance again at my church's temporary neighbour. He still for all I could see maintained his hustler status.

My man went on overdrive making a quick introspection and self-evaluation, on my station in life on my skewed and quick judgement on a fellow faithful. The parameters and my being mean in my offerings to God.

God must forgive me.

My Seed, Shall Not Sprout

He is an evangelical pastor in one of the major towns in the country. He drives a top-end vehicle, a six-seater, 4-litre, V8 Engine. A donation from his parishioners after several calls for contributions, exhortations and pledges. The evangelist is one of the old-fashion schooled; shouting hysterical, ungrammatical, gasping sort. His booming voice is loud carrying well and could be heard quite a distance away even without the speakers. His preaching causes fear to every sinner as all his phrases are descriptive of lakes of burning brimstone and ages of endless torment abounding in the afterlife.

But then his Sunday sermons always end with calls for "plant". Plant a seedling, this means the

giving out of tithes. The bigger amount you plant, he says, the bigger the blessings you are bound to get, not in the aftermath but on this earth. His is Indeed a prosperity Gospel.

My Friend, Harrison, is a man of means; a former diplomat who has retired and settled in the town. He is relatively a new member of this church. The pastor identified him on his first day in the church, three months back and was automatically nominated by the pastor as the deputy chairman of the tithe committee. The pastor's wife, a self-proclaimed reverent is the chair.

It is Sunday, the service is over, and the chairman of the development committee moves forward to make a special announcement. His announcement dwells on the fact that the Pastor needs a new vehicle, his two-year-old car is starting to develop some ...he says "*ignition problems*". He informs the faithful, that the Church development committee has therefore identified a custom-made sedan vehicle to be imported directly from Germany.

After all, he adds, direct imports have fewer ignition problems. The call therefore is to the faithful to make pledges to assist in the importation.

My Friend clears his voice and makes a suggestion:

> "*Why don't we sell the present vehicle and only add a small amount to purchase this new Import?"*

Despite being in a holy environment, the mood changes as the church attains a gravely quiet mood. The pastor stands up and he is in a rage. With the church regalia and his timbre voice, his rage is magnificent to watch. My friend Harrison is sure that if he was any closer, the Pastor could have hit him. He barely manages to control his temper and declares in a booming voice:

> *"Satan is in the mix; Satan has been with us for only three months and is derailing the church, the church of Christ"*

My friend was physically manhandled and thrown out of the church.

You plant your seed where you want. I shall not plant mine.

Marcelinus, The Preacher

At the edge of the Kijiji, where Solja has his residence, there is a makeshift open-air church where, every evening, there is a prayer service with speakers mounted to stream out loud music and preaching. Solja takes his time listening to the preacher and has struck some form of rapport with the preacher.

Marcelinus…well, er…to be exact, Father Marcelinus is my preacher friend. He inhabits a corner of the *Kijiji* and preaches his heart out to whoever listens-and they are few. But it worries him less as he argues that the big bearded fellow up yonder with the big pencil and book, notices him.

With bloodshot eyes, beads of sweat, and a foaming mouth, he thunders,

"*The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are with us. Fornication and adultery flourish* here,'' he points a menacing finger to the crowd" *I must - in a fashion -*

warn you that unless you as –as it were -repent –and so to say –mend your ways maybe -after a manner of speaking-damned!"

Marcelinus's words are ambiguous, mysterious, and superfluous, especially when he drinks a little wine for his stomach. Never mind, the little wine is a whole crate of a popular stout brand for as he unashamedly admits:

"*A tot or two of whisky in the morning before you are fully awake rejuvenates you after a long restless night, a further two tots of Vodka in your morning coffee makes you fully awake ready to face your many chores, a tot or so of brandy in your mid-morning tea fortifies you for the remaining part of the morning and two beers or so with your lunch vastly improves your appetite and finally a crate or two of cold, frothy, stout in the evening late in the night plays down your recurrent insomnia"* But he hastily adds-

"Let this drinking not interfere with the serious business of preaching the word of God!"

Histrionic, confusing, and a juggler of words is my friend Marcelinus… I once asked him purely as a matter of interest:

"… *Father, what denomination ordained you, what religious precepts do you ascribe to?"*

"Your mind is so low. He muttered that even the hand of God could not reach into the mire and lift you from the depth of your degradation".

But then he strives to answer after a hard stare:

"*What denomination would Jesus ascribe to if he comes back tomorrow?"*

I have no answer; he could not, therefore, also answer my question.

"*Holy man,"* I ask him, "Why *did you abandon your church, the Catholic church?"*

"*Three reasons,"* he answers.

"One, a *church should be A hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints."*

"Museum?" I question.

He ignores me

"Two!" He bellows, "*What can you say about a religion that makes a sin out of an act of congress and a sacred act of out of drinking alcohol?"*

"*Three"* He pauses. *"You willingly give up conjugal satisfaction, and then every weekend, you listen to glamorous details from your parishioners."*

Marcelinus, My preacher friend, a man after my own heart.

Give A Man Space!

Early on Sunday morning, an unlikely incident happened at the estate; a resident, door 96, engaged his vehicle in an activity that had all the hallmarks of an attempted suicide.

Four years back, his peers now say, he had been a very jovial company, a generous drinking buddy, and a common face in his bachelor Pad. They bumped into each other, and she quickly won over his heart. She moved in after a fast courting period, and a small and silent invite-only wedding followed.

He was tall and a banker at Westland's. She was also tall for a lady, dark-skinned, and an insurance executive at Upperhill, a perfect dresser and cute. They had a kindergarten-going daughter, and she was very sweet, too.

They were a loving couple, exceptionally devoted to each other, or so it seemed. On weekdays, they usually left the neighbourhood at exactly quarter past six for the town in their marooned coloured BMW (She loves Maroon), he on the wheels, and she on the passenger seat. He would normally arrive at his workplace relatively early in Westland; she would then take the wheels and drive back to her workplace in Upperhill.

In the evening, after work, she would drive to Westlands and pick him up for the journey back to the estate through Upperhill.

Once, during a party in the house, a friend had suggested in that unguarded moment:

"*Seeing that Westlands is much further than Upperhill, why don't you drop her first and pick her up later in the evening as you head home?"*

It was a conversation stopper; he gawked at the friend, and she stared at him with a jaundiced eye. The loud-mouthed friend was never invited to the house again.

At the weekends, the family, young sweetie included, would wake up dressed in jeans and red tops (She Loves Jeans), and what would follow was a loving car washing scene followed by a walk to the mall close to the estate for lunch and later in the afternoon a drive, she on the wheels, him, on the passenger seat to a neighbouring estate to see her mother (She Loves her mother).

The family would always return to the house in the late evening.

On Sundays, the young couple would attend church service together and sing in the church choir. She sings Soprano, and he sings bass. In the late afternoon, they would drink at a sports bar. She, a non-alcoholic beverage, and he, a cold beer and watching the English Premier League Football. (She supports Arsenal).

It was a loving couple, or so it seemed.

That was the trend until four weeks back; four weeks' bar one day. The estate had been woken up early on a Sunday morning by a loud bang and the

sound of tinkling breaking glass and yells from a female's voice. The bang sound was again repeated, interspersed with the screams of a woman. I rushed out. She was in a pink night dress (She also loves Pink) and was jumping up and about screaming:

"*Darling! Darling!''*

He was bare-chested, in undershorts, and in the driving seat of the BMW. As I watched, he again reversed the already dented car to about 40 metres and, at full speed, rammed it heavily at the house wall, missing her by a whisker. The impact was heavy, slamming him on the wheel and causing the vehicle's airbag to deploy.

She continued screaming. He remained in the driving seat, obviously hurt, a pool of blood forming on the seat from a gaping cut in the face and head. He was murmuring repeatedly:

"This woman…this woman …this woman."

He is still in hospital, fractured and mental.

Will he get any better? The doctors are not saying.

Give a man space!

Lockdown Conversations

The COVID-19 pandemic spread like wildfire, disrupting the world in many ways. Businesses across nations faced unprecedented challenges, forcing many to adjust, downsize, and, in many cases, close altogether. It also brought several new words, hitherto only used in select settings: corona, social distance, lockdown, barakoa, and quarantine.

It also changed the lifestyle of the Flamingo estate with Nairobi put on official lockdown with social activities entirely locked up by the last light. Residents found themselves indoors from about 5 p.m., and suddenly, families were forced to have joint evening meals, watch Television together and come to rediscover each other. Women were naturally too

delighted with the arrangements, and men felt suffocated.

My uncle Roy, ever full of initiative and who lived in the estate changed the narrative for men subtly and appealingly in a way only he could think of. He set up a base where the estate hen-pecked husbands could find some company and indulge in manly talks every evening. It was a perfect arrangement, and when on the Easter weekend running from Friday through Sunday evening, Uncle Roy introduced a bring-your-own-bottle arrangement (BYOB) an ideal setup was in place. I, Solja, by virtue of my age, stature, and closeness to my uncle, was saliently welcomed in the men's talks. It also, in some subtle way, brought back the dying art of conversation.

The men were all family men living in the estate. Balding, mid to late fifties, experienced, networked, confident, and at the top of their chosen professions.

The following are some experiences narrated by these wazees on their lockdown experiences. What made the conversations even more interesting was that they were done during the long Easter break, and with no place to go due to the lockdown, Familial relations were getting strained. Solja has, therefore, narrated the choicest morsels as narrated verbatim.

At No Cost

This is an account narrated by my uncle, a retired Kenya Air Force Colonel living in the estate. We guards have a strong affinity with this former senior officer. I suspect partly because he understands the challenges of a security guard, and also, he is generally a very good personality. You can see how he relates with the dogs in the estate and the kindergarten children. They love his company.

The colonel, a natural storyteller, swears that this narration is true.

My maternal uncle, Roy Gilo, is now clocking close to seventy but remains extremely hardworking, hard-drinking, clever, competent, and even if retired, loves dressing in top-quality clothes. He is also

popular, and his immense popularity is attributed to his love of spinning good yarns. This only happens after partaking at least eight tots of his favourite drink of Rum.

His tall tales are embellished with apt descriptions in a controlled voice and pointed pauses of the natural storyteller. His unnaturally bent nose further adds to the credence of the tales. I call his bent nose unnatural because it had once been broken, and the surgeon did a poor job fixing it. I had asked him how he had ended up acquiring such a nose. Uncle had taken a long drag of his cigarette, sipped his rum, and shook his head like a soaked dog, and with a twinkle in his eye, he slowly narrated the story to me.

It had happened about forty years ago, Uncle says, in the late seventies when flying was almost a luxury and exclusively for the wealthy or government employees. Flights were also uncommon and rare, and an aircraft crossing from one continent to another had to do with several short hops and connections. It was also during the apartheid regime in South Africa that

the newly independent African countries had an agreement that any aircraft having landed in the apartheid country would not be allowed to land in any other African country except for Rhodesia which supported the apartheid regime and Egypt for some special reasons.

Long story short, Uncle Roy, a military sports administrator then, had attended a five-day fully sponsored sports administrator's symposium in Bangkok, Thailand. His route back home was through London, where he had to spend 48 hours awaiting a British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) connecting flight south to Nairobi.

Bangkok, as a city even then, had been famous for its wild atmosphere. Nothing was off-limits, and it was a place where every one of the seven deadly sins of sloth, gluttony,lust, pride, envy , wrath and greed could be gleefully practised. Uncle Roy loved such arrangements.

With the symposium over and booked to fly home the following day, Uncle Roy took time to sample the delights of Bangkok. He said, in his words:

"Wanted to expel all the negative toxic energy before drifting home all empty."

Bangkok did not disappoint, as each part of the city had an intriguing story. Uncle visited several of the many dazzling temples, the spectacular palaces, the snake parks, and the world-famous floating market of Chinatown. Insistently, Uncle Roy also made time to visit select places that were especially meant for adult audiences. He lapped generously at the adult experience and ended up overindulging and getting wrapped up in the warm, throbbing embrace of a petite Thai (pun intended).

The following day, Uncle Roy had woken up late after the night of purchased copulation, finding the beautiful partner had conveniently disappeared with his wallet. Luckily, the hotel kept Uncle Roy's passport and air ticket in safe custody. Dishevelled, confused, and with a splitting headache, he managed

to find his way to *Suvarnabhumi* International Airport using the hotel's courtesy bus. Not surprisingly, he had missed his flight. Those days, flights from Bangkok to London were weekly; hence, missing such a flight would pose many challenges. His predicament was also double-barrelled; the organisers had closed shop, his hotel booking had run out, there was no Kenyan Embassy in the country and he had no money.

Uncle Roy presented himself at the flight counter and explained his precarious situation. It was dire; the airline's only option was to book him on the next flight after a week! Things looked forlorn, and Uncle Roy was at his wit's end. The situation was, however, saved by an old thin-faced, lithe-bodied, and bow-legged manager. The manager, who seemed ninety, had listened to Uncle Roy’s desperate pleas, searched among the many files (Computers were rare those days), and finally called Uncle Roy in his bare office where, for a full minute, he had stared at Uncle Roy from yellow jaundiced eyes as if castigating him for what he suspected had happened leading to the

ensuing tribulation. Finally, after a long silence, the manager outlined a possible solution to Uncle Roy's tribulations.

"If you agree and it is not a bother to you, the airline can assist in this regard," he solemnly announced through black/brown tobacco-stained teeth.

"We do have an aircraft taking off in the next three hours, which should take you to Perth-Australia, a 10-hour flight, where you should get a connection for the 15-hour flight to Johannesburg-South Africa; in Johannesburg, you will get a connecting flight to London where you just may catch your flight back home to Nairobi. At no cost to you," He intoned

"*At no cost?"* Uncle Roy had expectantly asked.

"At no cost to you," The sallow skin manager affirmed.

For the first time in six hours, Uncle Roy finally relaxed and smiled. Not only was he out of

prison, but he also now had the chance to see places he never imagined he could have visited. Besides, airlines provided free food accompanied by rum!

The 10-hour flight to Australia, which was both a country and a continent, was uneventful, and Uncle Roy kept himself busy with a steady supply of rum. At Perth airport, Uncle Roy bumped into the indigenous people of the continent, the Aborigines, and was amused to learn that the Aboriginal language had no word for "Yesterday" or "Tomorrow"; he could not fully fathom how they lived only in the present.

Eight hours later, Uncle Roy boarded another 15-hour flight to Johannesburg, South Africa. In those days, apartheid was at its peak. On arrival at Jan Smut's airport (Now Oliver Tambo), a seething Uncle Roy was shepherded together with other blacks and mixed-race passengers to another poorly maintained building emblazoned with large writing:

"Blacks and Coloureds Only."

White passengers were lifted by airport buses to a classy transit location in another part of the airport. Uncle Roy finally understood first-hand the evils of apartheid.

Four hours later, all passengers, blacks, coloureds, and whites, again boarded the same flight for London, with an expected two-hour stopover at Cairo, Egypt. It was Ironic that Uncle Roy noted that he would be overflying his home village in Kenya as he headed to London.

Again, the flight was uneventful, with Uncle Roy keeping himself busy imbibing his favourite drink. While overflying Tanzania, the pilot made an announcement which was done casually, that only pilots can manage.

"...that there is "ah" a minor hitch with one of the aircraft engines and therefore the aircraft had been cleared to land in Nairobi for a minor rectification, something which should take less than an hour to fix."

While other passengers were understandably jittery, Uncle Roy managed a rum-filled smile. The gods of luck were with Him again. Nairobi!

The plane landed, and even before it had finished taxing, Uncle Roy was making his submissions to the chief purser, who interestingly had a Kenyan Name- Maloba.

"Look!" He begged," *My final destination is Nairobi, and since this has happened, could it be possible that I will be allowed to disembark …now that the plane is here?"*

The Purser was adamant that it was against the rules. The issue was taken over by the pilot, who was ready to consider the request only if Uncle Roy had no baggage in the hold. Too bad Uncle Roy had a suitcase.

"Sorry," The pilot had murmured, *"not possible, too much of a bother*."

The passengers were again shepherded to a transit location at the west wing of Nairobi's Embakasi airport and closely kept under watch so that

Uncle Roy imagined he could not manage his way into Kenya. Uncle Roy spent the hours glued to the window, seething as he watched the airport routine of his beloved Nairobi; twice, he waved at faces he knew crisscrossing the flight apron. He also returned a wave from Aunt Vicky, who is Uncle Roy's wife workmate and who had disembarked from another flight.

The “minor hitch” of the plane was completed after 6 hours, with the tired passengers arriving at the old city of London late at night. A dishevelled, tired, and hangover, Uncle Roy slept for a record 20 Hours before connecting a flight back to Nairobi 28 Hours later.

Back home in Nairobi, voluptuous Aunt Suzy had been in a foul mood for two days straight, as word had somehow reached her that Uncle Roy had been spotted at the airport disembarking three days back since he had not been home she surmised therefore, that Uncle Roy, true to form was already in town but involved in some rather un-Christian activity in the seedy corners of town.

It was on Saturday mid-morning, and Aunt Suzy was in the kitchen preparing lunch when Uncle Roy reached home and gave out a cheery and loud hail:

"*Am Home!"*

Aunt Suzy would later swear that the pestle in her hand had flown without her control, landing fairly and squarely at the nose of unsuspecting Uncle Roy, breaking it loudly. Uncle Roy spent the next forty-eight hours at the Forces Memorial Hospital getting his nose fixed.

At no cost.

The Old Bull Versus The Young Bull

At the heart of the COVID-19 crisis is the quarantine issue; and from my lockdown experience, Quarantine is adding up to be an adversity many multiples more severe and challenging than most adversities I may have encountered in my sixty-year earthly sojourn. It is an unprecedented disruption of my life.

I am a consultant, and my routine has been leaving the house for the office daily at seven in the morning. Back at about 8 p.m. a warm shower follows before I settle down on my favourite armchair for a spot of news on television while taking supper. I usually go to bed at exactly 11 p.m.

I must add that I have only one wife- a corporate employee- tottering towards retirement and a father of four, two young male adults, and two

teenagers, a boy, and a girl. Pre-COVID-19, I can't recall when we last had a meaningful family conversation with the four products of my loins.

What I experienced on Good Friday was bound to happen. Every home has a seat where the head of the house sits. I have a seat reserved for me. It sits in a domineering position with the perfect view of the television and a small side table where my reading glasses and mobile phone rest. Everybody in the house, including the family pet cat, knows that!

So, on Good Friday, at exactly 34 minutes after eight in the evening, I walk in from my shower and dress in a gown, and I find my 21-year-old son in my seat. Even by the strange, elastic standards of this time. It is an abomination.

I am surprised, as he knew I was in the house, so, I give a long, steady gaze to this partly grown human being, hoping it would chill his blood. He gazes back at me, his jaws rhythmically clamping on a piece of chewing gum, and slowly stands up from the seat, still holding my gaze.

I now notice that he is broad on the shoulders, and beef has piled up on the biceps and the neck. I also noticed that he has a tattoo of a *Nanga (A ship anchor)* on his inner arms. The calf has grown into a young bull. I could not have noticed this, and I thank quarantine for this. I find myself thinking that if this was a real bull, then this was the appropriate time to put it down for prime veal beef.

I imagine that he is smiling inwardly. Our eyes meet, and the young bull throws a subtle challenge to the old bull. The challenge is so subtle that it goes unnoticed by everyone in the room save for me. It seems to say, old man, your time is up.

I have willingly taken the challenge; it will be a long, long-drawn fight. I have the experience and the resources to make it a long and interesting fight. The young bull will win; of course, he has the energy, the time, and yes, he is also stupid.

Yes, it will be a nice long fight, and I will love every minute of it.

The Quarantine Conversation

Given my view that the COVID-19 crisis is an extreme form of adversity, our attitude toward and response to the COVID-19 crisis can either make or break our experience of it.

I am a consultant, therefore within limits, capable of working from home. My better half is a corporate employee retiring within the year. She had been home in the lake region following up on the retirement project she was setting up at home. Her argument was valid.

"We need to start preparing to relocate back home when retirement happens."

Talk is easy. Re–entry back home after decades of sojourning in the city is not so easy. As if on cue, the president granted her the wish and

announced the sudden lockdown of Nairobi for at least three weeks. The presidential announcement on lockdown caught her when she was at the rural home.

Following the presidential directive, suddenly, my missus found that the would-be retiring home is not so interesting, especially when the hubby remains in Nairobi. This is a paraphrase of the conversation we had in the last four days:

Missus: *"I am leaving home for Nairobi tomorrow morning.''* (This is said from an audibly strained voice*).*

I: "*But why? You have only been home for two days, you are on official leave and because of the lockdown, and you can't make it back here to the city."*

I answer back, trying to follow an interesting part in an on-going movie on Television.

Missus: *"I must come."*

I: *"But why the urgency? Hang around until this lockdown passes."*

Missus: *"Who mentioned urgency? Why do I feel you don't want me back in the city?"*

I: "*It is not that way, you see, even if you come, you can't make it to the city. There are roadblocks to ensure you don't make it."*

Missus: "*Were the roadblocks made for me?"*

I: "*…No, but you see…"*

Missus: *"Are you aware that the toilet in the farmhouse is not flushing?''*

I: "*Er… I am not aware, but I hope the pit latrine is serviceable."*

Missus: *Are you suggesting I share the outside pit latrine with the farm hands?"*

I: "*Why don't you talk to Abele? He will know what to do."*

Abele is the farm manager and the odd jobs man, very dexterous with his hands.

Missus: "*Call him and instruct him on the same."*

My temper is starting to rise.

Missus: "*Then talk to that OCPD friend of yours to organise for me to pass through the lockdown roadblocks. I am coming to Nairobi tomorrow".*

She hangs up.

The conversation is forgotten as I go back to follow the series on Netflix.

Twenty-four hours later, at about 9 PM, Missus calls me.

Missus: "*Hi! Am in Nakuru, at Mado's place." Madeline, shortened as Mado, is her sister who lives in Nakuru and is married to a doctor.*

"*When are you coming to pick me up?"* She asks.

"*Pick you?"* I ask, puzzled.

Missus: *"But you had promised to organise my coming to Nairobi today?"*

"Look, there is a lockdown."

"*Are you suggesting that you made no arrangements for me to come to Nairobi?"* she hastily asks. "*You never bother about my requests, and you know how I cannot stand David."*

David is his brother-in-law, Mado's husband.

When I am stressed, a tic starts somewhere in my right eye and travels through the nerves to the heart. By now, I feel the tic making a resounding tap, and my heart has somersaulted with a thud.

I hereby declare, should I collapse and suddenly die during this quarantine period. COVID-19 is not to blame.

I Have Been Thinking…

"I have been thinking" …

The words are repeated from a deep voice; slowly, I remove my reading glasses and place the novel I have been reading on the side table. I am deliberate in all these manoeuvres because the person who has muttered those words has not been known to be so strong in that department.

He is nineteen and set to join the university later in the year. He has never attempted to address me using a complete statement. I looked at him again, and I noticed he had had a sudden growth spurt. Hey! Yes! He has a tuft of hair on the chin. Why hadn't I noticed this before? I suppose because our circadian rhythm is vastly different.

Young Julio wakes up at midday. Yes, Midday takes a hurried combined breakfast and lunch before ceremoniously combing his hair for four hours and jumping back to bed for another round of sleep.

He takes his dinner at two o'clock in the morning.

So, understand my attention when he says:

"*I have been thinking."*

Finally, he speaks- "*You know that old house we have in Kitengela?"* I keep quiet, trying to get the drift of the thinking.

"It is big, with open spaces and fresh air." He continues, *"Why can't you convert it to an old people's home?"*

My glasses go back to the bridge of my nose, and the novel I have been reading goes back to hide my face.

I am thinking indeed. Am I being tapped to be the first customer of that open, airy place in Kitengela?

During this quarantine period, God, take care of my friends. I will take care of my enemies.

In Vino Veritas

Due to the Lockdown, I followed the Easter vigil mass from a satellite television. It was moving and I felt that the ceremony had nourished my Easter spiritual gap.

On Sunday Mid-morning, a neighbour in the gated estate invited me for a drink. It was a happy surprise, considering we had never been close. I do not even know his name. Sauntering over to the neighbours' house, I found three other faces seated under an erected umbrella in the compound. I recognised the three as neighbours in the estate; they were nodding acquaintances. But I had never exchanged pleasantries with them.

In Wine, there is truth. Our initial suspicions mellowed as we realised we had so much in common

as we roared drunk on Easter afternoon. By early evening, I recall we were considering the many synonyms for being drunk: *tipsy, pickled, soused, stoned, inebriated, juiced, sluiced, under the table, bombed, plastered, smashed,* and *sloshed*. Each lexicon was found to be humorous and was accompanied by peals of drunken laughter.

We also got spiritual and found that we could share so many biblical quotes from the holy book:

"Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and valiant men in mixing strong drink," one intoned from Prophet Isaiah's writing.

"*Wine and new wine take away the understanding," another rejoinder drawn* from the prophet Hosea.

I chanted from the book of Proverbs, "Do *not look at wine when it is red when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. At the last, it bites like a serpent and stings like a puff adder*."

Finally, we felt comforted by the eternal words from Saint Paul: “A *little wine is good for your stomach.”*

Lockdown brought us together, and wine united us.

A Visit To The Doctor

After the escapades of Easter Sunday, I woke up tired and with a hangover, spending the Monday on a short fuse. I was –later - told by my granddaughter that I had prowled around the house, thumping into furniture, rummaging in the kitchen, slamming doors, and turning the pages of the daily newspaper with some savage crackles.

On the second day, I could not contain the wretched feeling of malaise and strolled to the local shopping centre where I had always seen a sign reading Doctor's Place.

The doctor was alone and lacked that finesse you would expect from a member of such a distinguished profession. At least he had a stethoscope over his neck.

I suspected that he could have been sixty but looked eighty.

I explained my feeling of malaise to the doctor; he smiled broadly, put a gag on my arm, and told me that my blood pressure was high, higher than a cat's back.

"Be careful with what you eat, live quietly, avoid excitement, or you may pop off all of a sudden."

He then broke off in a sudden guffaw.

I looked at him in askance and told him that I was aware of my high-pressure issue and the management of it.

He looked at me and finally gazed at the window before remarking:

"In *that case, I would not be too much alarmed about your condition; I can tell you definitely that you are suffering from psychoneurosis attributed to the Corona virus.*"

He saw the look on my face and continued.

"It is not life-threatening, just a form of ennui from the expected layoff in your job. Don't get into a

panic hysteria. Get regular exercise, eat plenty of good plain food, and be sure to get eight hours of uninterrupted sleep."

He smiled.

"What is Ennui? What is psycho neurosis?'' I asked him.

"I suggest you google and confirm, there is nothing as great as the power of suggestion." Another guffaw. "Give me one thousand shillings, please."

I later learnt that he was a retired psychiatrist.

Daring Abroad –The Goma Experience

There is this subtle thing in life, that shadowy moment when the generations shift, and a man becomes an elder. It had happened to Solja a year or so back when a kinsman had passed on in Nairobi, and the body, as tradition demanded, had to be transported home. Solja had, as a matter of course, gone to the mortuary to condole with the family as the body was being removed from the morgue for transportation to Mumias. The crowd consisted mainly of Matungu residents living in Nairobi who had gathered outside the mortuary doors, waiting and talking in low tones in the manner that people do around death. The attendants, meanwhile, were locked in the morgue preparing the body. After about 10 minutes, a mortuary assistant in gloves and white

gumboots had peeped out and called out to the mourners:

"Ebu wazee watatu waingie wasaidie kidogo."

Two elderly grey-haired men, without thinking, peeled out from the big crowd and moved in to give the suspected unpleasant assistance to the mortuary attendants. The mortuary assistant, master of the moment, rudely called out again:

"Nilisema wazee watatu!" he shouted, looking in our direction before adding the word of challenge, "*Ala!"*

Solja then realised that every eye among the mourners had turned in his direction. Surprised, he looked around and realised that he was the oldest remaining person among the mourners. Solja had unwittingly become an elder.

Solja, however, welcomes a time when his age is appreciated.

My nephew, Steve, was in love, and despite my humble occupation, I was invited to be part of a team to deliver bride price for the *Kijana* in the Democratic

Republic of Congo (DRC) at a town named Masisi, 50 kilometres beyond the DRC/Rwanda border town of Goma.

Goma is an interesting town. It has a population of about one million. Like the fabled phoenix, Goma rises from the ashes every twenty years or so because about twenty kilometres from the town, two mountains dominate the skyline of the border town. Mt. Nyirangongo is an active volcano that every twenty or so years, spews magma from the innards. The hot, semi-solid magma naturally trickles downwards to the city causing death and destruction. The locals believe that demons reside in the innards of the mountain and occasionally trickle down to the city of Goma at opportune moments. Massive lava deposits are spread throughout the town and used as improvised building materials. Such as the intricacies of nature that about 10 km further east beyond Mt Nyirangongo is Mt Nyamuragira. This extinct volcanic mountain locals say spews cold, making

Goma town and the region fall to freezing temperatures late in the night.

The town is spread along the shores of the idyllic freshwater Kivu (a corrupted Swahili version of *Jivu*- ash). The toxic ash from the volcanic Mt Nyirangongo is said to have settled at the bottom of the lake. Each eruption of the nearby Nyirangongo raises fears that the gas may escape and poison the town with deadly consequences.

The last time this happened was about 100 years ago, leading to the lake being referred to by some quarters as the killer lake.

Steve, my nephew, had been the brightest face in the local school. I suspect he takes over the intelligent genes from the Mum, considering that our clan has never been exceptionally good in the brains department. He scored high grades and was admitted to the university. Ten years later, he had found love in far-off DRC and had surprisingly invited me to be part of the team. It indicates that this young man had his head in the right place, for the current crop of young

mobile professionals like him would have opted to invite their whisky-sizzling, bhang-smoking unreasonable friends for such a life-changing occasion. Steve was well brought up.

Her name was French sounding -Francine. She was a slender woman, a bit dark, approximately twenty-five years old, well-proportioned, with lovely legs and a pleasing bosom that caught my attention. Her face was beautiful, adorned with big rounded eyes, full lips, and a broad nose. Unlike our friend Steve, she was quite tall, very tall indeed. One of her charming habits was cooing a sweet, *"Oh Lala!"* which might have been the winning factor for my nephew. In addition to her charms, she was a professional and a scientist. In our Omukama clan, we don't do things halfway.

Charles Bilongo, known as Chao by many friends (and a few enemies), was on the team. Chao's role in the visiting team was all about handling the drinks. His job was to enjoy the drinks fully because we needed to collect a significant amount for the bride

price. It seemed fair to us that we could recover some of our expenses, sort of. Chao didn't need a second invitation; he jumped right in.

Habbakuk Swiga was an ageing man of little stature, thin upon the head, crooked in the legs but with a good state of the body. He is a master of all the subtleties of marriage negotiations.

Martin Moli – Short, compact, and stout; short tempered, nearer fifty than forty, though he has claimed to be 30 for the last ten years. It serves a good purpose, especially with the fair gender. Moli has a face that is fleshy and healthy-looking. A man about town and a good orator with a working knowledge of French, Moli's main task was to bring his negotiating skills to the table. He was not to divulge to our potential in-laws that he spoke French fluently and, therefore, covertly kept an open ear to monitor any adverse remarks from our potential in-laws. We, the Abavakholo clan, think of everything!

Pato Songe- Averagely built, portly running on to fat, Pato has the gift of the garb, diplomatic and

suave, perfect in speech and dress, and has the natural pride and gait to go with it. He thinks on his feet and can be exceptionally persuasive. He was to be the lead negotiator during the bride price talks, with Habbakuk acting as his immediate second. We, the remaining team, were to be the cheerleaders. The fact that both Habbakuk and Pato had exceptional appetites for food was also a plus in the overall arrangement.

Our strategy went deep, too. For the bride price exercise and to increase our party's overall importance, I, Solja, was to be introduced as a serving major in the Kenya Defence Forces and to be addressed as such. Consciously, I started trying to imitate and act like a major I know which involved adopting a carefree attitude, being overly relaxed, talking in short, clipped sentences, and seemingly having a solution for any eventuality.

The rank of major was picked after close research assisted by my assistant, Jamin. Jamin had insisted that I adopt the rank of battalion, but I felt somewhat intimidated by that mouthful title; in any

case, I am yet to hear a military officer being addressed by such a title. We, therefore, settled on the rank of Major, and as he pointed out, the rank of Major was just right as it was high enough to mix with the top ranks and at the same time low enough to mingle with simple soldiers and what's more- he added- it sounded easy on the tongue.

Our 9-hour drive to the Democratic Republic of Congo was uneventful. We arrived at the Rwanda border town of Gisenyi, where we spent a night. Early the following morning, we dispensed off with the border formalities and crossed into DRC, where we were welcomed by Papa Mulogoli and his brother Papa Celestine, cousins to our bride-to-be (Papa is deemed to be a title for respect in the DRC). Their battered car was to lead us to Masisi a farming village 50 kilometres southeast of Goma where our hosts and our bride-to-be resided.

I had expected to see a shrivelled cinder of a country road, but lo and behold, it was smooth and well-kept. It unrolled itself before us in a pageant sort

of beauty through a tangled jungle, rolling hills and occasional level plains, lush meadows, grazing cattle, wide wandering curves of several streams crisscrossing the road, little villages, and always on our left, the shimmering and emerald presence of Lake Kivu and on our right the towering and ever watchful but angry Mt. Nyiragongo and still on our right but a further 20 KM beyond Mt. Nyiragongo a mute Mt. Nyiramuro. A picturesque scene like a corner of Postcard in Switzerland- only more beautiful.

We arrived in Masisi and were invited to our in-laws' compound to be. They were obviously a people of means. The room we were invited to was large, comfortable, and tastily furnished with a large dining room with a big dining table in the centre and a set of chairs made from gleaming hardwood, which can only be found in the DRC.

Like in my home neighbourhood, food in this area is not a love language. It is love. These people also attempt to feed their guests so well that they are

visibly in pain but continue feeding them that they belch and not once.

As a prelude to the feeding frenzy, water was brought and poured over our hands. One of the brothers entered, bearing a tray containing plastic cups containing fermented milk. It was followed by two thick mugs of tea accompanied by roasted ground nuts, sweet potatoes, roasted plantains, and buttered bread.

Half an hour passed, three quarters…one hour. Still, there was no luncheon. At close to the second hour, savoury smells of varied pungency began to prance and cavort about the room, followed by an encouraging sound of sizzling.

Suddenly, the door was silently opened, and Liswa, the bulky wife of Papa Mulogoli and cousin to Francine waddled in. She was holding two steaming bowls in both hands, which she delicately placed on the table in the middle of the room.

" *Hii ni ya Kudanganya tumbo tu*," she unnecessarily announced

It was chicken broth, and it was excellent and must have come from a cockerel that had just begun to crow and had now nobly sacrificed its life to make good broth for us

The two brothers watched us, and no amount of persuasion would induce the brothers to sit down and eat with us. They insisted on serving us. We said how excellent the soup was, but they lifted their hands in simulated disgust and said it was bad, very bad. Merely makeshift, and had they known of visit in good time, a meal more suitable for such distinguished guests would have been prepared.

Again, Liswa, the madam of the house, walked into the room grasping a gigantic platter heaped with veal, tomatoes, and rice. This was also excellent, and I said so. The two Mulogoli brothers again lifted their hands in a dismissive gesture, remarking that it was a mere worthless snack meant to humour the stomach as the main meal was being prepared.

" Ni ya Kushikilia tumbo tu"

We were so hungry and ate heavily of this, hoping it was finally the end. But no, once more, the door silently opened, and again Liswa walked in holding a big mound of Ugali, a lump of meat, fried onions, and *Kunde* enough to feed twenty or maybe thirty rugby giants.

I protested loudly that it was too much.

"It is a mere trifle," cried our lavish host, piling more Ugali mounds on our plates. To please them, I continued eating; I began to breathe with some difficulty. I swore I thought I would never eat food again.

Then I became aware that something awful had happened. The door was open again! I could hardly bring myself to look. With a sense of impending doom, I saw that the *piece de resistance* had arrived in the form of three big platters of Fish locally known as *Nyamami*- I inwardly pitied the nearby river; the slaughter there must have been terrible. Fortunately, the Habbakuk and Chao, always,

have an appetite of gargantuan proportions and eat heartily.

We survived the grand luncheon, and the next stage was the highlight of the day and that was the drinking bit. Eldest Papa Mulogoli ever diplomatic brought in a five-litre carton of wine and started by apologising: "*I'll have to beg your pardon, he started, but this red wine is so inconsequential, with hardly any character."*

We kept quiet, not keen to contradict him, "*Despite that*," he continued

"I believe it has some breed, though it has yet to reach its pinnacle. I must admit, though, that it has some manifestations of greatness as the French consider it the wine of the most magnificent sovereigns. They call it Napoleon of burgundies, and I am presenting a bottle for you to imbibe, though I think it will merely taste like paint to you being connoisseurs."

Chao smiled indulgently and poured it down his throat. Habbakuk followed suit, and they announced-

with their faces sweating and veins already bulging that it was passable as a wine. I tasted it and sprang back in my chair. It tasted like a paint remover.

We thereafter went outside to meet the team of elders who had erected a tent and were chatting, waiting for the negotiations.

Pato Songe stole the show. He gave a presentation well beyond expectations, and like a pugilist in a boxing ring, he weaved and danced against the expected flurry of punches from the Masisi team. When they threw a punch, Pato would have a counterpunch ready in the form of a stronger and witty argument. When they threw a jab, Pato, with finesse, would merely dance away and change the fighting stance before countering with a wild swing.

The duel was finally coming to an end – the Masisi team threw their final heavy-weight punch.

"We are giving you an exceptional lady, a beautiful, gifted and learned princess worth her weight in Gold- a Mwasi Kitoko! We don't see you Kenyans matching us in any way."

Pato had seen that coming well far at eighteen yards- to use a football parlance -. On his boxer toes, he sidestepped and threw a combination of punches, a jab, and immediately a right swing.

"*Oh, good Masisi people,"*- He intoned. "*You are not losing your daughter, but you are gaining a family, a politically heavyweight family, an eminent family. My boy and your daughter are going to be a power couple. Today, the politics of the Great Lake region is being rewritten right in your eyes."*

It was a coup de grace, and the influential Uncle of Francine, who had maintained a studious silence, commented:

"Verity, verity, Hii kijana naongea kama typewriter! Patia hao msichana!

As Martin Milo said afterwards; Pato was a riot.

The Dancing Demons of Goma

It was early evening when we managed to extricate ourselves from our would-be-in-laws. We thought we had made a good impression, Pato was in a class of his own when delivering his bride price submissions, and I looked relaxed and serious at the same time, as expected of any Military Person of my rank. Chao, as usual, also did not disappoint in the drink department. Habbakuk Swiga had made a big dent in the food department and was now indolently smiling, his stomach distended. Moli, true to nature, had struck a very good rapport with one tall, bewitching damsel, his attention I suspected not entirely holy. We drove back to Goma town, where we had earlier made arrangements to spend time. Chao and Habbakuk, true to character, were dead on

their feet, and we allowed them to remain in the guest house to sleep their heads off.

We entered a bar, its walls pockmarked by several bullet holes-the legacy of war.

The mumbling of the bar was immediately smothered, the laughter suppressed, and the clinking of the glasses subdued as three dozen or so pairs of eyes followed our progress as we casually sauntered to the counter. Their curiosity satiated, their fears borne of the war dissipated, and the bar continued with its previous sounds.

" *Leta kama tulivyo!'*

I ordered a popular beer brand from a taciturn barman.

Seated on a counter stool, I surveyed the stuffy bar environs. The bar was about 30 x 30 feet built in the shape of a J, with the counter forming the head of the J. The 30 or so patrons were seated on simple benches with their backs to the wall and some small tables holding the drinks. About a dozen patrons were very heavily built women; heaviness in a woman in this

part of the world is equated with elevated social status. Undeniably beautiful, they were resplendent in their beautiful and flowery “khanga” clothing, which reached below the knees. Two waitresses walked around replenishing the glasses of the revellers. Cigarette smoke swirled lazily to the ceiling. The room was dimly lit with about a dozen blue-coloured bulbs, giving the room a gay, romantic look. Music boomed from speakers strategically placed in the corners of the room. The Congolese believe in very loud music, and so the music, despite loudly booming remained phenomenal with the vocal structure, instrument arrangement and the fusion between the lead and rhythm guitars combining perfectly. It explains the musical genius of the Congolese Musician. It got better; the voices of the three or so four vocalists singing and chanting simultaneously, seemingly in disarray and yet well-choreographed, made them a marvel to hear, with the tunes aptly changing at different times while simultaneously merging into a single continuation. The fullness of the

tumba hand drums, together with the dexterity of the trumpets and crowding of the fading drums and cymbals, was pure musical art.

Unlike what the evangelicals would attempt to explain to you, Demons may not necessarily be that bad. We had yet to experience the power of the dancing demons in Goma.

A popular beat erupted, and the crowd surged to the dance floor. Music is a religion in the country, with popular beats being a syrupy mixture of the French language, the sexy Lingala dialect, and the ubiquitous Swahili phonetics. The music played on; it was the kind of music that the vocalists dominated, with the music accompaniments playing softly in the background. In this case, Couples swayed slowly to the beat of the beats. It was a joy to be part of the surroundings.

The solo guitar strung a twang that reverberated several times as ng! ng! ng! And with that, the guitar faded.

The tch!tch!tch! The sound of the drums now took over, supported by the acute sound of the rhythm guitar and the bellow of the bass guitar. The vocalist added gusto to this by shouting some unintelligible words. Then the saxophone and the trumpet sounds streaked in, and the music exploded in a towering crescendo. The demons possessed the dance floor as the dancers entered a trance- arms raised as if in supplication, increased gyrations of the hips, a marked wriggling of the buttocks, erotic thrusts of the pelvic, faces glistening in sweat, eyes closed, lips slightly parted. A controlled madness as the musical orgasm took over.

I had seen and enjoyed the best of Congolese music, arguably the most enthusiastic celebration of the female rear end anywhere in the world. But the show I saw on this day in Goma reached a new level. It was burlesque meets gymnastics; all set to a driving, unrelenting rhythm, and it was as raw and powerful a display of sensuality as I had ever seen.

The music slowly faded, raised arms lowered, the rear end gyrations decreased, the eyes opened, and the demons finally retreated to Nyirangoro Mountain.

The Mini United Nations Wedding

The wedding between my nephew Steve and Francine was outdoor because of the big crowd, and indeed, it was a mini United Nations wedding. The bride had been born in DRC, raised in Burundi, baptised in Rwanda, went to school in Uganda, and worked in Nairobi. She was a child of many homes, and all these homes appeared on the best day of her life. The five cultures now showed up. Resplendent in their attires and language and palates.

Anybody in Emanane village will never forget that day. Our lad had pulled all stops, and food and Beer flowed like never before as two helicopters made several chartered hops, bringing in distinguished guests.

The wedding was conducted by the resident pastor of Matungu, assisted by five other pastors, two from Uganda and one from Rwanda. Our pastor was a beloved but ugly man, possibly the ugliest man of God I had ever met; boy and man. His teeth seemed to be too many for his mouth, therefore protruding out of his mouth at various angles. This could partly explain why the locals said he snored so loudly that his snoring sound could be heard in the adjoining parish!
The English Book of Common Prayer guided the service, and Solja followed the service with much interest.

Dearly beloved

It must be beloved, at least from the bride's perspective. Having my nephew is a big catch. No expense was spared for this big wedding (I am told the budget was Ksh 2M! *Mwanaa!*) The bride's side is hale, gay, and hearty and outnumbered our family, and we are on home ground. There is a sprinkling of Mzungu too, so this is indeed a big occasion in our

part of the world. I am in charge of security, and with proper liaison and payment, the government security machinery is top-notch. Solja is strutting around and is finally a celebrity. My beloved, indeed, there is love in the air, and nothing is truly done without a genuine dose of love.

We are gathered here.

Yes, it is an international gathering; The United Nations cannot do it better. Three local church choirs have massed together, the entire sub-location is here, and a variety of transportation gadgets are here; Boda Bodas, Private vehicles, buses, and two helicopters all gathered here in the small village of Emanane.

In the sight of God

Yes, in the sight of Nyasaye, Ngai, Mulungu, Mungu, Enkai, and atonda. The presiding preacher, assisted by his counterpart from Rwanda, is the visible representation of God in the ceremony. I have known the local priest since my school days, he is not of the brimstone and fire-shouting kind, and I have to admit, I have never heard of any scandal from him or even

his immediate family. Can I imagine a better representation of God?

He was not a demagogic pastor like those who deceive with prosperity preachments and connected innately with the common folk.

To join this man and woman

Connections indeed, Solja thinks of joints… of ropes, chains, handcuffs, or bracelets. Of toothpaste, of bed sheets, of offspring, of his religion. Who said Man is born free but forever is in chains? Solja attempts to stop his train of thought from running haywire as it brings back memories of his short stint at the Industrial area remand prison after some unwarranted accusations. It is indeed a chain; you have to meet the in-laws and get to know them, let alone accept them!

In holy matrimony.

What is the good book version of matrimony? Soldier googles and out it comes: it is the loving union of one man and one woman with the purpose of the procreation and bringing of children."

Solja is a wee bit confused. The catchwords are baffling. He rereads the definitions. One man, one woman… so technically, Steve is caught up on this, but our clan is famous for having more than one wife. What about Mpango? Solja wonders.

Solja reads again the Google definition and the word "Loving" pops out again when he reads it the first time. Is loving in marriage a seasonal thing? Can one maintain love forever in a matrimonial setting? What is love?

"Solja reads again the definition" *For procreation and upbringing of children,"* so no children, no matrimony? Solja wonders, how would one know that? I look at the Bride, and she has a good bottom, a good breed, so at least I know she will give us the clan a good offspring. But then, will she allow the children to adopt our culture? Our names? Oluchina, Shamakhoko, Ayodi,Wepukhulu or will we have Lingala names like Papa wa Ilunga or, even worse, Kuku Zbengndu wa Zabanga... Cock of the walk in the local Lingala Dialect.

It is bound to happen later when she loses love for her father. Will she strive to shape her sons into the desirable opposite of their father?

Solja looks at the definition again and is happy to note that "Matrimony" has failed to mention inheritance or resources.

If there is anybody here that knows a reason why

But of course! They know no reason why beyond what they have come to know. I think now of this young lady who is destined to join the extended family, and strength increases. I look around, and there is the Irene the textile and fashion teacher whom Steve knocked on when in secondary school, the unlucky offspring should be in teenage years I think. There is the other lady from Kabras whom he also knocked on when still at university. And then there was that Nubian Lady. I gave up…on the count.

We will keep quiet, but we know. What could this bride and her people be hiding? Does she emanate from a night runners clan, the ones we call in our neighbourhood- *piti! piti!* After the sound the heels

make late in the night when a night runner does her jig. Or maybe she could be related to the demons roaring inside mountain Nyiragongo…or perhaps as cold as the adjuring mountain of Mt Nyiramuro We may never know this early.

These two should not be joined.

Solja can think of a million reasons for these, but are they justified?

Marriage is not beneficial to menfolk as formerly men used to get married and share their resources with women in exchange for exclusive access to their bodies. Women today are given the incentive to break the marriage contract. Where else can a person be rewarded for breaking a contract?

Marriage for the sake of marriage is indeed not a good idea.It gets exhausting, and men feel that they are stuck in a rut.

They marry because they have to, not because they want to. Marry someone you cannot live without, not someone you can live with.

Marry for love. No other underlying reason because it lasts even if values are aligned.

Better to marry than to burn.

Together

Is it possible to be truly together? Are we not permanently alone? Are we not individuals? Can you be lonely by yourself? In a group, in a crowd. Can being together be only with another person? Is it being in a union? Can we be together with nature, landscape, an idea?

Let him speak

I shall keep quiet. Do I have the wherewithal to say anything? Will anybody listen to anything I say now, will be listening to? Did anybody warn me before I married Mama Othonje? Doesn't the Rose have so many barbs to cause so much damage? Doesn't a marital problem have ways to solve itself?

Or forever hold

What is forever? Is eternity forever? Are we bound to be married for eternity? Precisely, we live in a world

of flux. Aren't the ties of marriage supposed to be indissoluble?

His peace

Why not her peace? What is peace?

There is a silence, and then the church erupts in wild acclaim, a general pandemonium as the collective tension of the faithful is released.

Harusi tunayo!

Steve's Letter of Frustration

It was too good to last; our boy was too soft, and the lady from DRC had a sadistic streak. She failed to adequately accept that she was finally hitched. Without any reason, she began to disturb the pleasure and propriety of their life, becoming jealous without any cause, finding fault with everything he did or uttered, and making coarse and ill-mannered scenes.

I advised my nephew one time:

"Mwanaa," I told him, "Kwetu sisi Hapana piga bibi,tunanyamazisha hao kwa kuwapatia promotion, waitwe bibi kubwa."

But that kid was wise and failed to listen to me, or the message was too profound for his orally castrated mind to understand. One time too many, he

raised his hand against the lovely lady, she moved out, and soon a letter arrived with the famous opening paragraph: We are acting under instructions from…. And his nightmares began.

Steve took time to express his disgruntlement with the Francine lady through a letter. It was bitter and castigating the lady, it never expressed any hope for a reunion. It was a true reflection of what probably happens in households where we outsiders consider perfect wedding fits. It confirms the famous argument that young men should work extra hard in marriages, that weddings are for one day and marriages are supposed to be forever.

This is his verbatim letter, as his mother showed me:

Dear Friend, (And *I call you this in the strictest sense of the term*)

I have received your well-worded letter, and I have to admit that you still have that knack for stinging words. In your discourse, you come out as suave, complicated, and feminist. The people who

don't know you and read your letter can also discern a strong feeling of awareness of your gender identity, coloured by your professional background, pedigree breeding, and maybe social position.

You blame me for all manner of ills from my drinking habits and my toilet eccentrics and insinuate strongly that I am a useless do nothing, not even aware of the schools my daughters attend.

You, however conveniently forget that you indeed have a share of the blame for the path I am now taking- sharing the blame in a big way because, in no small measure, you have contributed to it.

You remember when we started, 15 years back, the days when I was young, tall, and handsome. You were then at university, fresh from the village, shy, unsophisticated, loving, and well,l slim? Those were the good days; you remember heartily joining me in our Friday evening joists- partaking *nyama choma* and enjoying the full support of my three best friends, *Nyundo*, *Komeo*, and K*ipenga*, and still my best friends. Do you remember how you were so close

to my sister Ruth? Do you remember the 14-year-old *Alfasud* saloon? The one you had nicknamed the lover? Do you recall my favourite drink? And my occasional blackouts? You accepted all this and wormed your way into this circle of friends, winning over my relatives –particularly my sister –Ruth- whom you had cunningly identified as the most important seconder for your corner.

Out of the goodness of my heart, I accepted you; I could have left you then as periodically the Jezebel in you sprang out. When I attempted to walk out, Ruth stopped me with a look. My friends stood up to me for you; I stood by you, and you took advantage of me having the predatory instinct of animals. You had pre-prepared plans to counter my habits and my beloved relatives and friends. And you won. The wedding photos attest that; you look dashing and happy – having won the race…I look shell shocked, disbelieving-suffering from PTSD- PRE traumatic stress disorder.

You remember how through one of my many friends and drinking partners, I fixed you a job. Coming especially after the many failed ventures you had attempted in setting up businesses. I stood by you- a permanent safety net absorbing your stresses and perennially a ready shoulder to cry on.

And I was still there when you sent the house helps packing in their dozens- They could never do anything good to your satisfaction. I tried reasoning out with you – you turned rabid on me, heaping accusations on my sexual relations with the maids. As your career openings improved, you also opened other war fronts in your social circles, starting against my friends and my relatives, including my sister Ruth. And you did not even attempt to be subtle about it. It was double-barrelled and at point-blank distance and worse - in my presence.

The final straw was during your *chama* meetings when I came in late after a breakdown. You jumped on to me, with your chama friends watching. Your lips were dripping profanity, tearing me to

pieces, and lumping my relatives and friends in the bargain. And you talked, no, you shouted. The neighbours merely watched the surprise in store; they were used to it. Your Chama friends gawked; our daughter looked lost. You pursued the slaughterhouse line thinking you were winning- well; you did, but only for an instant in the sprint. You forgot that marriage is a marathon, and short dashes rarely make a big difference in a marathon race.

The other name for love is sacrifice- I have sacrificed for you. You orally castrated your husband and robbed him of solitude in his own house without providing him with any companionship. You deem it fit that I walk away…Indeed, I will do so … literally, one foot after another until out of your life, but you forget that institutions outlast individuals, and unlike you as a man, I remain an institution. Maybe mankind should adopt the sex life of the spiders-they have a tumble -she bites his head off.

Your erstwhile friend,

Steve

Mama Ochuti

Sometimes, not so often, Solja gets a generous tip from one of the estate residents. So occasionally, I go for a treat, and my treat usually is at Mam Ochuti's place for a change of diet and to catch up with the local rumour.

Mama Ochuti’s kiosk is open-air, shaded by a big mango tree. Mama Ochuti owns the place and has six, sometimes more, workers to assist in the food business. It is good business, I think, considering that there is never a day when the place is not packed full at lunch hour.

Mama Ochuti is ugly. She looks like a product of a loving union between a Gorilla and a Rhinoceros. She is big-boned, obese, mono-eyed, and waddles. She also stammers and brooks no nonsense, no debts,

and no sweet customer talks either. Her unwritten motto is:

"Come, sit, order food, pay eat, and go. Don't attempt to waste my time".

Despite this treat your customer rudely demeanour, her place is always full as her meals are always fresh and delicious. The meals are also quite practical; *Ugali madodo, Chapati, matumbo,* and *Githeri.* Tea and *mandazi,* of course, are the default meal.

The meals range in price from 50 to 120 shillings and strictly eat as you pay. The money is collected by the daughter, who walks around shouting orders to the open kitchen staff while collecting money for the meals. Mama Ochuti's daughter is aptly named Aor- three letters, No more, no less.

Aor has learnt her customer relation lessons from the best, her mother.

Like her mother, Aor stands at over six-foot-tall and is bound to grow even bigger than her mother. She is pretty without actually being beautiful, but the

ugliness is struggling to come out. You can see it in the shape of her bones. And yet, she is only twenty. I have never seen her share a laugh with any of the customers.

That is Aor for you.

We learn fast, and we keep off Aor entirely. A young new upstart had tried reaching out to seduce Aor with endearing epithets. He had persisted until one day Aor, gave it to him, close, loud, double-barrelled, and out of this world.

"Enda to---Bibi yako, ama leo wacha yeye ndiyo akuto---."

Aor had snorted after another attempted seduction.

The insult was unregulated, raw, dirty, and a conversation stopper of World Cup standards. We are crude in our words, but for once, we found our jaws supported by our chests. Mama Ochuti- for once –had laughed loud and long, her big body shaking with all mirth.

Aor has been left entirely alone with no attempt at banter from us, her customers.

But then we are used to the no-nonsense, no-smiling attitude of Mama Ochuti, and we occasionally chide her with words to hear her rejoinders:

"*Leta ugali na matumbo,*" I call out, "Na *uharakishe.*"

Mama Ochuti looks at me and keeps quiet…. Probably mentally sizing me while preparing up an appropriate rejoinder. The fact that she stammers also does not help for a fast rejoinder. She bends down to put food on my plate and waddles as she brings the food to me.

"*Umechukuwa muda,*" I remark, pressing on my advantage.

"*Mmmmmmmuda ya ma……ya….ko,"* She stammers back deadpan as she walks away.

I keep quiet, digging into my *ugali* and *Matumbo.* It is delicious.

Today, there is a new fellow saunter who looks smart in long white trousers and a white shirt. In

his hand, he has a phone and a smartphone, which can be seen at a casual glance. A thing of beauty and our desire for ages. He could be a mere passer-by. His shoes look hand-woven, and his watch golden. He gazes at our silent selves and surveys the seating arrangement before self-consciously planting himself on a corner of the makeshift bench. A strong waft of an aftershave lotion wafts after him, with a nice close-cropped hair. He has the indescribable bearing of a Lingala musician.

Aor moves over to him, her giant shape gangling with a pen at hand, and asks for his order. He gives a long order:

"Two Chapatis cut into pieces, with meat and soup splashed over with Kachumbari and pepper. Just a touch of pilipili" he adds. "*pilipili iwe kimbali".*

Aor is unperturbed.

"*Chapati chafua!"* She calls out, simplifying the long explanation into those two words. We hold our peace, but the excitement is building up, paying our attention to our food, furtively looking at him.

After a reasonable time, Mama Ochuti shuffles along with the food and dumps it in front of the man.

"*Wapi Kachumbari?*" He calls out to the retreating back of Mama Ochuti.

She doesn't even bother to look back at him and gives a rejoinder with just a trace of the stammer:

"Kkkkkkkkwenda Hilton" and adds "Nugu!"

Our laughter could have tilted the Richter scale!

The Estate Party

Christmas and the end of the year are the seasons of merry-making and making fun, good cheer and laughter, steady binge drinking, and crazy hangovers. For this reason, the Flamingo estate management committee decided to hold a communal end-year party for the residents. A subcommittee was set up and looked at the necessary formalities for three months. I, Solja, as a security expert, was co-opted in the overall arrangements.

The 23rd day of December was selected as the best day for the celebrations.

The weather was ideal; they could not have had a more perfect day for a garden party. It was proving to be a windless December afternoon without a speck of cloud up in the sky. An event organiser

hired for this purpose had set up six marquee tents, the decorations were splendid, and a disk Jockey with a Rastafarian head gear was tuning up his thing with sounds of pom1 ta-ta tee ta! occasionally throbbing. It had all indications of being a perfect day.

A huge marquee tent had been set aside where three barmen were to serve an assortment of drinks.

The merry-making was programmed to begin modestly at about 3 o'clock with a first round of drinks as the group of residents, together with the guests, got seated. There was to be an opening statement from the Master of ceremony and then a word of prayer from a resident who also is a presiding bishop in one of the evangelical churches in town. A short statement was to be delivered by the party committee chair, who would invite the estate chair. Meals and drinks would then follow, and then the party was expected to take a life of its own as the residents got to know each other and hopefully not be so inebriated.

I, Solja, had been boosted by four extra security guards to boost the overall security cover. As head of security, I was allowed to dress in my best suit. The guards, of course, were in uniform. I had deployed them in select positions where they could easily react to any emerging security issue. In my smart blue-black suit, I would be roving around as appropriate.

Things were going on as per clockwork. At about 4 o'clock, the estate chair, Mr Juko Georges, emerged from his house where he had ensconced himself much earlier with the guests and where he had also been fortifying himself with a few tots of whisky to get him into the best party mood. Don't be too judgmental too soon about the chair. You see, the chair needs several tots before meeting a group of people. It is also one way of eradicating that nervous tick on the left eye when he has to bring himself to the standards of lesser mortals.

So, as the party mood builds up, the prayers have been done, and the opening statement is to be

delivered. Parry of house number 64 delivered the opening speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it has fallen on my lot this afternoon, as in years past, to perform a very pleasing task but a task for which my poor powers as a speaker aren't all too inadequate. I can't imagine…"

"*Typical Luhya- no imagination,"* the owner of house number 74 muttered next to me.

"However, that maybe, I can only ask you this afternoon to take the will of the deed and to lend me your attention for a few moments while I endeavour to express to you what my feelings are on this occasion…."

"Kisungu mingi, na unaendesha Toyota Passo, bure tu!" A mutter again from houses no 74.

I move away from him, not keen to be associated with those words. I noticed that he was already well inebriated.

Soon, the terse speeches are over, meals have been served, and drinks are flowing.

The next hour or so is devoted to shaking hands and getting acquainted, after all, the main idea of the party is for the residents to get to know each other better.

A group of the estate matronly women well upholstered of ripe but well cared for middle age were seated at a corner of one tent. I could see the faces had adopted a permanent sarcastic and I dare say pride. They were the kind of women, I thought- who, no matter how well things were going, went through life to the accompaniment of a running commentary of complaints, an endless litany of dissatisfaction. They nagged without ceasing.

And true to my expectation, they have refused to take the famous *Amarula* wine and have demanded a special kind of wine with a complicated title, which the committee has now been forced to send one of the waiters to seek from a liquor shop.

The only visible problem, though is that every resident here is a snob and has the private conviction

that every other person is supposed to *kow tow* to him. Invariably the conversations here are stilted.

But water finds its level, and the residents are sitting with their contemporaries and peers. I am noticing a big divide between lawyers, doctors, engineers- so-called professionals, and business entrepreneurs.

You can sense it: The professional men, seated in a corner of one marquee, are feeling somewhat lordly toward the business people at the other end of the marquee and consider them lacking in sensibility and intellectual curiosity or depth. The professional man would say they are near-sighted to the point of seeing nothing beyond the sales chart. The businessman, on the other hand, thinks of the many professional men as dreamers and idealists only good to be separated from their hard-earned currencies. In my thinking and experience, the businessman is more practical.

I walk around doing my patrols, and conversation whispers follow me:

"*Do those eggheads think that they have a monopoly of ethics…"*

This is from one of the three university professors;

"You just need a drop of two, and your daughter's acne will be over. Let me give you the online contacts…"

"*Men are dogs…. Imagine analalanga na huyo mboch, na vile bibi yake ni msupa….Na hata yeye si angetafuta kutoka inchi ingine…."* This is from the well-padded upholstery group.

"*…it is a likely consequence, conceivably withers may, I suppose against their will, give credence to his utterances and thereby be unlikely disseminators…"* from the professional group.

"*Hakuna lorry kama hiyo, yangu imewahi ua driver, imeshawahi ua Kondacta lakini bado inapiga kazi…."* From the Business group, specifically from a hardware merchant.

"*Gari ikaitisha gia ya tano….."* from a Matatu investor.

"I *concur with you; they are stereotyped, weighed down by a sense of their own gravitas…"*- The professionals

Suddenly, I spotted trouble in paradise looming.

The rotund evangelical Bishop clad in an expensive *Kitenge* shirt had moved towards three known beer drinkers in the estate and joined them, I suspect, to win them to change their alcohol-drinking ways and be ambassadors of Christ.

I casually moved within hearing distance. I knew this was going to be interesting.

They kept quiet as the Bishop joined them and started talking in a smooth voice, beyond my hearing; hence, I failed to grasp what he was saying. But the first rejoinder was given in a loud, inebriated voice:

"Boss! A man who wears Kitenge does not deserve my drinking time. No sane man wears that unless amekaliwa," he took a long swallow from his beer.

“Bla Bla Bla” –Murmurings from the Bishop as the triumvirate looked keenly at him.

“Are *you worshipping, or are you a practising Christian because of eternal fire Insurance?”* Another question from the whisky guzzler.

“Bla bla bla” - murmurings from the Bishop again.

“If *you need the threat of hell to be a good person, then you are a bad person on a leash. Is that the correct position?”*

One of them asks as they burst out in collusive laughter.

The Bishop is big on television and in social media, he is one of the old-fashioned shouting, hysterical, ungrammatical, gasping sort, his exhortation phrases descriptive of lakes of burning brimstone and ages of endless torment abounding. But in this instance, during this estate party, he met his match. The Bishop looked at them and slithered away, lesson learnt- stick to the television pulpit.

After sufficient beer and spirits have been copiously taken, the ice has been shattered, and people start not calling each other by their first names, but repressed feelings are now openly displayed. For example, mild, retiring, and soft-spoken tall Engineer Daudi Mitingo has just backed up his immediate neighbour Parry Pamoa- into a corner and is telling him in a loud voice.

"*Nini Mbaya na wewe, Uluhya haiwezi kukutoka? mambo gani unaendela kufuga jogoo kwa estate? kila asubuhi- kokokoko hii- ni Nairobi!"*

"Ambia yeye,hawa Wanyore ni mabangi tu! kula kuku porno kama sisi!" Shouts a shrill voice from a tall, bespectacled lady of house 74 who had been steadily drinking her beer all alone. Her name is Martina, loves Lingala music, has a tattoo on her upper arm and is rumoured to own a garage where she is the chief mechanic.

Solja wonders-what is "*Kuku Porno?"*

"Wewe Nyamaza hapo –Mwanamke wa Idakho anajua nini ?" Parry, the owner of the noisy cock retorts back.

"*Kwenda huko!"*

"*Must you mention Abanyore in that manner?"* A voice asks from some quarter of the tent.

" Wewe pia nyamaza, mbwa yako imepatia yangu kisonono!"

Oh ye gods! - Solja groans

At another corner, the well-padded madam of house number 56 crosses into another marquee where four skinny ladies, all living in the extensions, are laughing their heads off. She towers over them, yanks the wig off from one lady, and throws it on the floor.

"Wewe ndio unaitwa Mrembo! Wachana na nyumba yangu, tafuta bwana yako!"

Delicate Little Miss Vicky, bespectacled with a Janet Museveni hairstyle, lives in one of the extensions and contributes to the general merriment by regurgitating the expensive whisky in a corner of the marquee in a rather un-ladylike manner.

Jeremy, whose family is in Arusha, Tanzania has cornered one of the ladies – a Muslim- also living in the extensions. Jeremy, beer in hand, is assuring her in his newly acquired Tanzania accent that:

"*Daa! Mke wangu hatuelewani kabisa-ushaona. Nimeslimu juzi –dini imekubali nataka mwingine- Alhamdulilahi Jamani tupendane!*

By early evening, the party is in shambles; the earlier smartly dressed and conservative officers are now in shirt sleeves. Paper cups and broken glasses now litter the floor. Even the ever-quiet Peter, abbreviated as PEO, is now loudly singing in an off-key voice. *Jerusalema!*

By the time the estate party breaks up, long toward midnight, much ill will have been generated among the flamingo snobbish residents that it will take at least twelve months for the estate to get back to normal, and that will be time for the following year's party.

Welcome to the Flamingo estate party next year!

I Once Killed A Man

The words were pronounced slowly by the resident of house 63. He was a former professional boxer, which partly explained why his head sat a trifled crooked on his shoulders and tucked into the shoulders as only a professional boxer could; his hands deep in his jacket pocket and unhurriedly walked in slow, laborious steps, eyes permanently cast down. A big man, he also owned a thirty-year-old vehicle that he occasionally drove very slowly. He is an introvert and very devoted to his lovely wife. They had no offspring. That was about a year ago.

Eleven months back, he came back from work early in the evening and found out that his wife had walked out of his life and, as he learnt, had flown abroad to Europe. A small explanation in her

scrawled handwriting was left at the dinner table, almost like a suicide note. As a farewell note, it was short and succinct but had the hit of an ungloved blow on the solar plexus.

"I have to leave; you are too good for me."

As he later told us, there had been no indications from the wife that things were headed south; they had not exchanged words in a very long time, and things seemed perfect, too, so she could not understand what led to the walkout. Mato (Let us call him that) was understandably devastated. After this bad experience, Mato sought comfort on our evening fire (We Soljas always lit a fire in the night for warmth and company). So every other evening, the hunched figure of Mato would stroll over from his house carrying a chair and spend several hours with us very quiet chain-smoking cigarettes as we watched the night ebb by. Occasionally, he could unconsciously breathe out a long capitulating sigh before asking no one in particular:

"Why Me?"

The cry of ages.

Unanswerable.

Then, at about 3 a.m., he would slowly detach his big self and take slow, unhurried steps to his now lonely lodgings.

He had been a boxer for 14 years, starting as a diminutive flyweight and steadily rising to a muscled middleweight, at six feet tall and built like a truck. He had worn the national vest several times and had an Olympic medal to show for it. Several years of professional boxing in Europe helped him acquire the house in the estate, a jalopy and set up a gym on the outskirts of town.

I should explain here that if I do not, in the telling of this tale, speed up the dialogue somewhat, the reader will die of weariness since the conversation with Mato took several weeks to come out because of the inordinate long gaps between my questions and his answers. Mato could make a long-drawn statement, take time to slowly light his cigarette, take a lungful of smoke from the cigarette, and take

another hour gazing at the fire before giving another chunk of the episode in slow, irritating, and measured sentences. The story, therefore, came out agonising slow in dribs and drabs. I surmised that this could have resulted from the many years in the squared ring as a pugilist.

This, then is the story as narrated by Mato:

In Greek Mythology, *Thanatos* is the death drive, an instinct for death, a god of death. It probably exists in all of us. It explains why we embrace a violent streak hidden deep in the core of our beings. It probably explains why violence has gone hand in hand with most kinds of human entertainment. Don't we even wildly cheer two cocks fighting to death in enclosures? Don't we stream to boxing contests, if not to witness the knockouts?

I am a pugilist, a professional boxer, and I suspect that I have a slightly higher dosage of this death drive in me than the average man in the street, for in the boxing ring, you live like you are dying. It

explains why Miyawa Mitoko died in the ring because he had tempted fate and paid for it with his life. He, too, was a modern gladiator, and I had killed him.

I was at the tail end of my career. He was starting him; It was a lucky punch from me that had brought him down, a sucker punch that saw life ebb away from him at the prime of his life.

But he had it coming.

He had it coming. It is lonely in a boxing ring as few activities in life are as physically demanding as exchanging fisticuffs in a controlled environment; a three-minute fight in the ring, I suspect, is a hundred times more exhausting than doing the marathon. For six weeks, I had trained aggressively for the fight against this new upstart. Mitoko had taken it easy, at least from the social media reports. He tempted the fates, training only when he felt like it and then not pushing the body enough, barely moving a muscle. The grapevines incessantly mentioned his late nights almost daily and the bevvy of beauties who graced his

bed. Something unimaginable for a serious boxer, six weeks to a fight.

On the memorable night of his death, I heard Mitoko in the adjoining dressing room, self-psyching for the fight. He was singing loudly in his local dialect. It was a shrill, disconcerting voice, periodically interspersed with some form of barking almost akin to a wolf.

Misawa Mitoko, being the challenger, had moved out to the ring first. He was, as always, dressed in baggy black shorts with silver lace running on the sides and black boxing boots. No socks. He climbed into the ring with tepid cheers and scattered boos. I had followed next as a champion, walking one step after another slowly and deliberately outward, a sign of calm. Turmoil inside.

Tink! Tonk! The bell had sounded loud, and Mitoko had rushed at me like a tiger, throwing hard shot after hard shot, intending to go for an early shower. His jabs were fast, flicking like lightning and pounding my body incessantly. By the middle of the

round, the torrent of punches had slowed me; I was also bleeding from a cut on the eyebrow and was completely winded. The first round ended with me holding to the ropes after a haymaker punch had struck me under the heart. Blows on the heart can drive the wind and will out of a man.

The second round was a replica of the first round, with Mitoko leading the fight. I danced, bobbed, weaved, ducked, blocked, and parried all his punches, but he was fast, too fast. The few jabs I threw were always years off target. The bell saved me as a sledgehammer had left me stunned, tossing me like a tea bag on the canvas. As I was going down, Mitoko smirked at me from gnarled teeth:

"*Agua Mala!* He had sneered, *"You whore."*

My coach led me to my corner for the welcome breather. I heard or felt nothing, no sound, no noise. All I heard was the head under the water emptiness.

“You are doing fine,” my coach muttered. “You are doing fine”. He repeated. I suspected hopelessly.

And suddenly, there was hope.

My coach had noticed that Mitoko had grabbed a water bottle from his seconder's hand and was gulping water unashamedly. Boxers only sip water between rounds as gulping water leads to the water sloshing in the boxer’s tummy, slowing him down. No boxer has ever won a fight after gulping any liquid between rounds. Mitoko’s action was, therefore, unwarranted and an affirmation that instinct had taken over training.

My coach was smiling: “*He is breathing hard,”* he commented, *“He is blowing!!”*

B lowing in the boxer's jargon is when a fighting boxer yearns for more air in the lungs and opens his mouth to get the full complement of air as if the nostrils seem not wide enough.

Normally taciturn, my coach was now ecstatic.

"Take your time in the third round," he says, *"Work only on the body. Kill the body, and the head will die.''*

He grins: "*Set him up. Don't try to knock him out."*

The bell sounded. Once again, Mitoko swarmed over me, overwhelming me by applying constant pressure, taking away my spacing and timing, closing inside me, and delivering flurries of hooks and uppercuts. The home crowd was silent.

I was completely subdued by the barrages raining. I found myself merely putting up a passive defence, trying to stay on my feet and not getting hurt. It was all over, I thought. The belt was gone, I was no longer a champion, and surprisingly, I did not care. I had been outclassed.

Even without seeing him, I sensed the referee moving in to stop the fight.

With a sense of desperation, I reached back, swung back my fist in a primitive way from planet

Jupiter, and threw a punch, thrown without hope but a sledgehammer nevertheless and a lucky punch.

You never see the knockout punch. The punch landed squarely on that angle between Mitoko's ear and the shoulder. His eyes bulged, and he grunted almost comically and went down in a heap. Blood dripping from my face, I stumbled to the neutral corner fast as the referee commenced on the mandatory count.

"Stay down," I begged Mitoko from my heart. *"Stay down."*

He obliged me, opened his mouth, spewed a projectile of vomit, and stayed down forever.

Young Mitoko Miyawa was cremated a few hours later.

Society's barbarism and death instincts were vividly portrayed by how the press concentrated not on the loss of life but on the beautiful fight the evening before. The press loved it, yapping about the fight. They were loud about how an old geezer had wasted the life of a promising young boxer inside the

ring. That boxing was going to be worse off from Mitoko's death. It talked about Mitoko's unbeaten runs and his Olympic gold medal. They spoke about how fleet-footed he was, his perfect timing, his intelligent use of the ring, and his explosive right hand. He had style, they added, a rhythm to roll in with the hard punches from the opponents as if eating them out. They chorused; his head movement was superb, they added; he rolled from the waist.

I was briefly described as "lead-footed," clumsy, and "Vaseline-legged." My knockout punch was described as a mere lucky punch. They conveniently forgot that I, too, was an Olympic medallist.

The indifference to his death was also glaring from my team as later in the evening, a victory party was held in my honour, and praises were heaped on me. I kept gawking.

A victory party? It's more of a condolence party for me.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that the sense of *homo sapien*s brutality, despite the huge technological jump, is still at its prime. We are no different from Caesar of the Roman Republic, who assuaged his restless subjects with gory scenes of underfed lions tearing up unarmed gladiators. And the crowds loved it. After the gory scenes, the popularity rating of the Emperor rose as the citizenry was now satiated; temporarily, yes, but then satiated for a time, growing restless again for another numbing sensation of even more brutality until the only sensation left was that of sensation itself as sensations getting ever more brutal and violent to impress the numbed soul.

The bell clangs loudly, and I bite the mouth guard hard, roll my neck, tap my face with the gloves, and shuffle forward to meet yet another opponent keen to explode me to eternity. Probably we, the modern gladiators, are getting it right. We live like we are dying, for without death, what would life be, and what chance would it have to mean anything?

A few weeks after the end of this story, the cold and stiffened Mato was found one morning seated at his sofa set, lifeless. He never fully recovered from the desertion of his wife, and his broken heart could never repair itself; I suspect that he had willed himself to die.