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MY DRIVER



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*For my mother Aileen Mary Gee, née Church,
whose spirit and flight bag came with me to Uganda.*

PART I

In-Flight Entertainment

1

The sun is rising on Uganda. Light streams across Africa as the rim of the earth turns slowly towards it. It gilds the mountains, it floods the plains.

In London, people are still asleep, though Vanessa Henman hasn't slept a wink. (This evening, she will be flying to Kampala, and of course, she will have to get to the airport. She's tried to contact her ex-husband, who is obviously the right person to drive her. But he has been mysteriously hard to get hold of, and recently Soraya, his new girlfriend, is less friendly. So naturally, her son will drive her. But still she is nervous. Africa!)

She looks at her watch: it's 5 AM. She tries to visualise how it will be. She imagines the sun, rising on Uganda. Noise, colour. A river of black faces. River not sea, there's no sea in Uganda. Which sits right on the equator, in the middle of Africa. What does she remember? Loud, honking taxis on Kampala's main street, white Toyota vans spilling fumes and people. But the details ... no, it's still out of focus.

In Bwindi, western Uganda, near Congo and Rwanda, countless columns of soldier ants pour through the jungle, moving fast and low, layers upon layers, running over each other's backs and onwards, glossy, unstoppable, rivers of treacle, some smaller, reddish, others

larger and blacker. Anything in their path, they eat (except the gorillas, who sometimes eat the ants, scooping them into their mouths in handfuls, until the stings are beyond bearing). It's cool and damp here, up in the hills.

The apes are just waking in their nests, great trampled baskets of wet green tree-ferns. They live in cloud – white nets and shrouds. Webs of pale rain blow across like curtains, veiling Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. A large grey furry hand extends, slowly, and plucks some breakfast. Its owner has a name, Ruhondeza, given him by humans, but he only knows he is the chief, the silverback, that he has been chief for years and years, though the family is getting smaller. He is staring at a tiny baby gorilla, skinny, little spider-legs and a great quiff of hair, sleeping curled up against the dugs of his mother. Ruhondeza frowns; something very important. He is the chief, but is he the father?

Not far away, there are human soldiers, bearing a confusing variety of initials: the UPDF, the ADF, the PRA, the FDLR, the FNL, Laurent Nkunda's rebel army, and remnants of the LRA, the Lord's Resistance Army, driven down south from Sudan. Too many names, too hard to remember. Many of the soldiers do not know what they are called. Most of them long to give it up and come home. But have they done things for which they can never be forgiven? Who is to decide what can be pardoned? The peace talks at Juba have been quiet for a while, and in the long nights it is hard to be hopeful. This soldier wears only rags of uniform, dead men's trousers, a dented cap, though he is a sergeant in the LRA. The gentle rain soaks through his clothes. Is he a boy or a man? A short-range radio crackles into life and his cortisol levels jag and peak with the daylight. A new day, another day to kill or be killed, though the newspapers talk about pacts, amnesties.

In Kampala, the capital, an eleven-hour drive north-east, cloud

streams up, grey and thick, but moving swiftly: soon it will be hot. A marabou stork – a *karoli* – struts magisterially on the pavement, tall as the humans, who don't appear to like him, his long hairy pink gizzard swinging in the light like a warm, greedy chain of office. He cocks his head, and looks wise and cynical. A tourist behind glass in a jeep is thrilled, and takes a photograph. Smartly-dressed people are walking to work, in immaculate shirts and liquorice-shiny shoes, though the pavements are broken, red and dusty. The traffic is thickening: the taxis start hooting. They hold fourteen people, assorted bags of millet and potatoes, and crucifixes meant to keep the drivers safe from other drivers. Men ride *boda-boda* bikes crowned with thick hooked stems of green bananas, or with wives, in brilliant pink or turquoise, perched side-saddle behind them. Everyone drives more or less in the middle of the road, which seems to offer the best chance of getting where you're going. But mostly, Kampala seems peaceful, and organised.

Mary Tendo's in Kampala, getting ready for a trip. She checks her glossy helmet of hair in the mirror and smiles at herself: red plump lips. She is not too slim, which is excellent, for she wants to look good to go to the village. It's her last week at work before the journey, and she has to make sure all the right checks have been done. The first hour of the day, between seven and eight, is always her favourite, with the Executive Housekeeper's Office to herself, her computer screen glowing blue and orderly. Time to get a grasp on what there is to be done on this particular morning at the Sheraton.

It's the whitest, straightest hotel in Kampala, and the most modern, until a few years ago. Now it still stands tall on its flowering green hill in Nakasero, where the rich people live, but it seems to be straining up on tip toe, anxious. The truth is the Sheraton suddenly has rivals – the boutique Emin Pasha, the enormous new Serena, whose rooms are rumoured to be best of all. The Sheraton staff,

too, are slightly nervous; everyone must be on top of their game. Someone important is coming to Kampala.

But outside the banks, down on the teeming main road, the navy-clad, rifle-toting guards can risk feeling sleepy as the sun gets hotter. Their rifles droop towards the ground. No-one is going to challenge them. It's a safe city, with a disciplined army. President Museveni's on top of things. (He's been on top of things for rather too long. Rather too much on top of things. He is rumoured to be going for a fourth term of office, and the First Family is getting richer. But give him his due, he has disciplined the army, at least when they are close to home.)

A lot of building work is in progress. Round the Parliament building, and near the Serena, pavements are being mended, with pick-axes and new white paving-stones, ready for the next torrential rains, which will wash the red mud underneath away, and spread new red diasporas of earth across the whiteness.

Hotels are going up: more slowly, they're falling down again. A skyscraper that rose up five years ago, right at the centre of the city, on Kampala Road, made of shiny pink stone, pointing boldly at the future, is peeling in the tropical heat and rain; long shreds of pink skin wave from head to foot, blowing in the wind, flapping hard against its body, and under the torn scraps of rosy veneer are grey panels of what appears to be cardboard. It will have to be mended, like everything else.

Mary Tendo frowns and smiles as she peers at her screen. She refuses to wear her glasses at work. Glasses are ageing; she is strong, and young. Hotel occupancy's 67 per cent, at the moment, not bad in view of all the renovations being done. For CHOGM is approaching, pronounced '*chogamu*', though British people call it 'choggum': two months away, less than two months, the Commonwealth Heads of Government will be meeting in Kampala. And the Queen, the Queen will be coming to Uganda.

Though not to stay at the Sheraton. The Queen will be staying at the Serena, or so it is rumoured. Mary tuts, softly. That ugly, dirt-red, overpriced hotel. With its terrible history, which we will not speak about (though the Sheraton has its own history, which Mary Tendo is used to denying. People whisper that, under Idi Amin, in the bad old days of Big Daddy, they used to hear screams in the middle of the night. But it's all so long ago it must be forgotten, or else Uganda cannot move into the future. Ugandans have become good at forgetting; and many of them are forgiving, also.) Mary is sure that the Queen did not choose to go to the Serena instead of the Sheraton. *Ebimu bya kwesonyiwa*. Even a Queen can be badly advised.

But the Business Forum is also important, Mary tells herself. CHOGM Business Forum is coming to the Sheraton. And delegations from Commonwealth countries. These prestigious guests will be coming to the Sheraton, where Mary is Executive Housekeeper. It is a big job. She was recently promoted. She is still enjoying her new, larger office, with its glass door and strategically-placed mirror so that she can keep an eye on what's going on even when she has her back to the door. Through the glass, now, she sees her right arm has arrived, Pretty the Desk Clerk, who channels all the messages from the floor Supervisors, the Linen Supervisor, F & B, and Ken Fixit.

It's not quite a normal day, today. Not just because Mary's getting ready for her trip, but because of the memo from the Director of Training and Standards, who is one of the two people still above her (for she has risen, through her skill and hard work. Mary Tendo can work harder than anyone.)

She came to the Sheraton two years ago as the Linen Room Supervisor, a job she previously held at the Nile Imperial Hotel. From the Linen Room she was promoted to Assistant Housekeeper. Now she is Executive Housekeeper (she likes the neat clicks of the syllables, like a key turning in bright new locks). The hotel is a theatre: she sees

it like that. She is the stage manager, one of the few who make sure back of house runs like clockwork. The guests only see the well-lit stage, their gleaming glasses and enormous beds, the ironed linen white as the snow in London which Mary so loved when she first saw it, the soft light in the Piano Bar, the line of gold-uniformed receptionists standing behind the long desk in the enormous foyer, smiling like statues. But Mary knows the truth is all sweat and muscles. Beneath the desk, the legs of the receptionists are aching, because they are never allowed to sit down. Under the surface, the stately Sheraton swan is paddling, paddling, furiously. At the back of house, behind a slender partition, the washing machines are roaring, the huge ironing machines are creaking round, the men are standing ironing the details by hand, the linen-room maids are doing stain removal: pre-wash stain removal, post-wash stain removal. At the front of house, when the guests aren't looking, the maids are dusting and polishing the bedrooms, Hoovering and smoothing, spraying and wiping, then hastily filling in their Room Reports.

But none of this must happen in front of the guests. The essential illusion: here is ease, and calm. *Kiringa kizinga*: it's the Sheraton, and the Sheraton is an oasis. Today the Director of Training and Standards has decreed that the maids need a training session. It's an update, really, on the Sheraton Brand. Mary sees the need: it is too easy to forget. Even she sometimes forgets to smile at the guests, which is the first essential at the Sheraton. (Of course, many of the guests are fat and rude and lazy, and when they complain, it is unjustified, and their only motive is to get a rebate, so Mary Tendo would like to go and kick them on the buttocks, and she could, because her legs and feet are well-developed. Besides, they have no right to be richer than her, just because they are American or European. But instead, she smiles. She's professional.)

Getting hotter now. Mid-morning. Overhead, the thunderclouds

are building up, great bellying, Victorian, story-book clouds. The rains are early this year, and heavy, though the real rainy season has not yet come. But now there's a different smell in the air. Not rain, burning. An acrid smell. And the air is thickening with smoke, on Kyaggwe Road, in Old Kampala. The Kisekka market traders have sold spare parts for motors here for years and years, but now the government, which likes progress, has leased their market to Rhino Investments, who people say have links with the First Family. Does the government care about the little people? Perhaps it thinks they belong to the past, and Uganda must move into the future.

But Uganda contains both the past and the future. People hike into the city, out of the past, from the distant villages, which fear they are forgotten. They are hoping to see the President.

Outside Parliament House, on Parliament Avenue, a patient group of women, dressed in their best clothes, in bright clean *gomesis*, with a few men, not young, wearing jackets in the heat, are waiting, oddly still, sitting on the grass by the side of the road or standing proudly in the heat by the wall. They are waiting to see the President. They come from Mbale, in the east of Uganda, and President Museveni has promised he will see them. They are bringing him documents on many subjects. Their roads are flooded; many homes are cut off, and people have drowned; the water's still rising. And then, there are many problems with rubbish. Once Mbale was the cleanest town in Uganda, but now there is no money to collect the rubbish, and rubbish plus water could mean disease.

But there is something more important, too. They have something to say about forgiveness. They know that the government's consulting its people about what should be done to the LRA, whether Kony and his generals should be tried in the courts, whether peace can happen without punishment. And the people of the east have their own view on this, because they remember what the government did, which the western media don't talk about, to the Itesot people,

just north of them, how the people were loaded in a train wagon at Mukura, and then something else, which must not be spoken, to teach them manners, and the air smelled of burning.

Yet the people of Mbale do not want vengeance. They simply want everything to be remembered, and then everything can perhaps be forgotten. Because maybe Kony is not a devil, or no more a devil than the government devils, and maybe the only way to stop all the evil is to set it aside and begin again. Most have a soldier somewhere in their family.

Maybe all the devils are only human: when things have been remembered, could they be absolved? For then they could sort out the roads, and the rubbish, and all the problems that have been deferred. When you live so far away, people don't remember you, so they have travelled to see the President, but they won't make trouble. They have good manners. If you show good manners, you deserve good treatment. They came the day before, but they are still waiting. *Perhaps the President will see them today.* They notice how bitter is the air in the city. It must be the cars, pouring past in the heat. But there's something extra: something smoky, stinging, which makes them uneasy as they stand by the roadside. The people of Mbale miss the air of the country.

In fact, the traders of Kisekka Market, angry in the heat, are making things hotter by burning tyres, blocking the road from the city, and lighting bonfires in the narrow alleys, while others are running to lock up their stores.

But this is Uganda. You aren't allowed to riot. Protest must be made by peaceful means. Police Acting Director of Operations, Grace Turyagamanawe, will decide to normalise the situation and make things more peaceful by using tear-gas. Soon everything will be quiet again, though a smell of burning hangs in the air until, at 3 PM exactly, the dark clouds burst, and rain drives down in straight sheets of water, as heavy as lead, seemingly from every direction, from left

and right and even almost horizontal, and in minutes yards and pavements lie inches deep in water, and a beggar stands spellbound, not trying to shelter, feet wound in dark rags like bandages that slowly blacken, while busy Kampalans, smartly dressed but coatless, walk swiftly through the deluge under small makeshift roofs of briefcases, folders, newspapers, which are staunch for a few seconds, then bend and crumple darkly. Only a few have coloured golf umbrellas.

The people of Mbale have no umbrellas. They huddle together, chattering softly like wet birds, their garments less bright, their faces less happy. They will not look smart to meet the President. But it's only a shower: this isn't the country, and by four-thirty, the sun is shining again, and they move apart, and stand there, steaming. They will still be standing there as night falls, though one of them, smiling, tells an anxious white tourist who noticed them yesterday and also that morning, who stops, rather shyly, to ask them how they are, 'Don't worry, *Mzee*, we will see the President. And when it is night, they will put us somewhere.'

Yet three days later, without seeing their president, the people of Mbale go back to their district, or as near as the bus can take them to their district which is cut off by the floods that have swallowed the roads. There's a Ministry of Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, after all. But a lower-ranking member of the government has met them to explain: the Ministry of Disaster Preparedness was unfortunately not prepared for disaster.

Quite often, the President does see his people. He believes in meeting the unhappy and disgruntled, and he invites the newspaper, *New Vision*, to take photographs of these occasions. He is warm and charming, brisk and acute, with a youthful manner, although he's in his sixties. He has a big smile and a cute baby nose. Those who like him call him 'M' or '*Mzee*' or another, clever nickname: M7, short for MuSEVENi! He is the father of the modern nation! After the other fathers – Obote, Amin – who slaughtered thousands of their

children, the international community is keen on Museveni, if a little less keen than they were at the beginning. And Ugandans, also, are distinctly less keen, though he tells those he meets that he will fix their problems. After all, he is the President; he just needs to make a phone call. They go away feeling honoured: all will be well. Over the months that follow, the warm feeling goes away. Of course, he is too busy to help them all. He is busy making sure that Uganda moves forward. He is leading Uganda into the future.

Mary Tendo belongs to Uganda's future. She believes in it: she is making it happen. She has made the great move from the village to the town, from the unwritten past into the urban future. She is educated; she does not make errors. (If she makes an error, she straightaway corrects it.) She knows there are dangers in making errors, and dangers in going back to the village, even though she will only be away for ten days. There is a chance for her rivals to make trouble for her, as used to happen at the Nile Imperial, when Sarah Tindyebwa thought Mary too ambitious. Now many people might like to have her job, and the Assistant Housekeeper, Rachel, is very capable, and although young, perhaps too capable ... Mary must leave all the paperwork in order, but then, her paperwork is always in order. She knows she is clever and organised. She remembers, with a smile touched with both scorn and pity, the collapsing towers of paper in Vanessa Henman's study, in faraway North London, where Mary once lived.

Vanessa. The Henman. Who once loomed so large, but now Mary thinks of her as small, and old. Poor Vanessa did not know how to manage paper: Touch Document One-Time only, Deal With, File, or Forward to Disposal Channel (though it is true that there are always some things Pending). Instead Vanessa hid things and let things slide. Long ago, in London in the distant past, when Mary Tendo was working as Vanessa's cleaner, to pay her bills while she

finished her MA, Mary tried to sort Vanessa's desk out, and throw most of the messy paper away. But Vanessa had shrieked, and started waving her hands, though later she apologised. Mary went back to London quite recently, when Vanessa begged her to, and this time things were different, because Mary, of course, was a mature woman, and already successful in Uganda, and she was no longer a cleaner or a nanny, but advising Vanessa in her hour of need, because life had grown sadder for Vanessa. Little Justin was adult now, and in bed with depression, and asking for Mary Tendo, not his own mother. Of course, Mary flew over and sorted everything out (once Vanessa had agreed to reward her properly) and by the time she left, Justin was married with a baby.

But the paper situation had become a disgrace! Piles loomed like mountains on every side of Vanessa's expensive laptop computer, crumbling piles of old paper like great dead termite hills. Vanessa's whole life seemed to have slipped into Pending. But it doesn't matter. It's Vanessa's problem. Mary has her own life to live in Uganda. She looks around her office. Everything's in order.

And yet she feels a slight unease about Vanessa, because Mary is borrowing Vanessa's ex-husband.

Mary Tendo has invited Trevor to help her to mend the well in her village, and she has asked Trevor not to let Vanessa know, because otherwise Vanessa might want to come with him, since Vanessa seems to think they are still married, though she also likes to tell the story of the divorce, which she demanded bravely, as a feminist. However, Trevor's still allowed to do jobs around the house, and he has the right to be blamed for things – their son's depression, the loss of small objects, the occasional failure of his attempts to mend things. If Vanessa were to come to Uganda, Mary knows there would be stress for the whole of Uganda. And so she has sworn Trevor to secrecy.

Trevor is a plumber, and a very good one, but when Mary rang

him in London and invited him to come and mend the well, he just laughed and said, ‘Mary, I am only a plumber. There are experts at this sort of thing, you know.’

‘Yes, there are consultants, they are very expensive. But Trevor, I think you will help me for free. We talked about it when I was in London.’

‘But Mary, that was years ago. You can’t just ring up out of the blue –’

‘You are a practical man. You like to be helpful.’

Trevor had whistled, quite loudly, and started laughing. ‘Mary Tendo, you’ve got the cheek of the devil.’

‘Trevor, I think you know I am a Christian.’

‘Oops. Sorry. It’s just an expression ... I do know something about wells, it’s true. I did some work on boreholes when I was in the Territorial Army. Royal Engineers.’

‘You were the Queen’s engineer?’

‘It’s just a name, Mary. Sort of weekend volunteer. But maybe your village doesn’t have a borehole.’

‘Trevor, a well is a well,’ Mary had informed him, with more confidence than she in fact possessed, but Trevor had to be made to agree. ‘I knew you would be pleased to be reminded. I remember how you wanted to visit me here, and I remember how you liked that book by Winston Churchill, *My African Journey*.’

‘Yes, I gave you my copy.’

‘Thank you, Trevor.’

‘But did you read it?’

‘Yes, I did not like it. He was always talking about “The Black Man” and “The Asian”, but the only ones with brains were “The Asian” and “The White Man”. I think you know that Ugandans have brains.’

‘Mary, you’re cleverer than I am,’ sighed Trevor. ‘You’re wrong

about Winston Churchill, though. Wonderful writer, Winston Churchill –’

‘So that is settled,’ Mary cut in. ‘Will you come to my village, as my guest, Trevor? Charles and I will drive and pick you from Entebbe.’

There was a long, rustling silence before Trevor said, ‘Yes.’

So now Trevor is coming to Uganda. And so will the Queen, a little later. And Kampala is digging everything up, and replacing it, painted and patched and riveted, buffed and re-routed and disinfected.

(And others are coming, far away to the west, on their long, long pilgrimage back into Uganda. Soldiers are stumbling and falling through the trees, half-asleep on their feet, with a wave of stink from their stiffened uniform, blood, sweat, old dysentery. They no longer smell it, but nocturnal animals, just waking up as the red sun plummets, pause, stilled by fear, warm flanks quivering. Sniffing the air. The badness is coming. And in a nearby village, an old woman shivers, who once lost her daughter, and listens, frowns. Something is near. Hope, fear. Somewhere in the shadows, life or death walking. A soldier, so lame he must be ancient, a commander, pushes the scarecrow ahead of him painfully onwards, poking and prodding with a darkly stained stick. Looking up, he suddenly sees between leaves a small silver sickle, a thin new moon, very bright in the heavenly glow after sunset, which reminds him, reminds him, but he will not remember. Is it a message? It stares straight at him. He shudders, terrified God has seen him.)

The Rhino Pub, at the Sheraton, is closed this week for refurbishment, and so drinks are served outside, by the swimming pool, as the sun grows pink, and the shadows lengthen, and sleeping mosquitoes near still stretches of water start to twitch, minutely, with faint signals

of hunger (though there is no malaria in Kampala: at least that is what people tell the tourists, and the tourists nod and smile but keep taking their pills, and spraying themselves nervously with DEET, and they are quite right, because of course it is a lie, there is malaria in many places in Kampala, in the slum districts where no tourists go, in Kamwokya, on the way to Bukoto, and around Nateete Market, and although the haunts of the rich are mostly free of the disease, mosquitoes sometimes make mistakes and cross borders, and find the blood of the wealthy equally delicious).

So that few are swimming in the turquoise pool at the Sheraton as the sun dips down, as the date-palms grow dramatic upon the pink sky, as the flood-lights come on and pick out the ridges on the tallest palm-tree in stark black and white, and the birds – white egrets, white and black crows – all darken to cut-out colourless bird-shapes that fall or whirl up and drop down again in resistless spirals of sleepiness to their evening roost in the leafy branches. The sky's almost empty as its red starts to fade, then deepens to faintly starred indigo. The last bird to go is a lone planing stork making one last pass above the poolside drinkers, listening, perhaps; there are always listeners; so in Uganda, people are both brave and cautious. The dark is total, now. The stars steady.

A new moon rises: something in the offing.