

## *Stanley Gazemba*

### Pema peponi

Mukabwa was getting sick of the pestering of the village women. He had half a mind to kick them out of his 'office' and to ask them never to come back. In any case they were crowding all over the place, blocking other business that might have been more lucrative. He sat at the head of the cracked cement stairs, smoking a cigarette slowly, glaring at them through red, hooded eyes. He took a long puff at the filter-less cigarette and blew the smoke out slowly, so it formed a long column-like jet. Then he tapped the long stick of ash off the end of the remaining cigarette stub and spat angrily in the shriveled flowers at the foot of the stairs. He needed to go off for a drink at the little kiosk by the hospital fence. Right then that was just what he needed for his frayed nerves.

One of the women, seeing him calmed down, decided to have another try at persuading him. She adjusted the knot in her tightly-wound cloth belt and started walking in his direction. The rest stood wailing demonstratively by the blue pickup truck that they had hired to transport the body, flinging their arms up above their heads and beating their chests as the corpulent tears streamed down their cheeks. The little beat-up Datsun pickup reclined back on its hind wheels at an angle from overwork, more like a locust that was about to hop, the metal railings poking through the patched-up old tarpaulin like the ribs of a starving mongrel. It was swathed in broken branches and red ribbons to indicate the grim job for which it had been hired.

The men stood in a somber bunch, a little distance from the truck, discussing amongst themselves. They had resigned themselves to the long wait when it became apparent they were getting nowhere bargaining with empty words. Close by, leaning against the twisted trunk of the only tree in the yard, the driver finished his cigarette and lit another from the stub. He was in a sour mood. He had already had a bitter argument with the

party about the time they were taking to settle the matter. It was a long drive to the village where the burial would be, and the gathering clouds overhead were making the prospect no more welcome. The last thing he needed was to get stuck in the rut-marked cattle-track of a road leading from the village after a downpour.

The woman approached Mukabwa, her bright, teary eyes fixed on his face beseechingly. The bright nylon scarf she wore was wound tightly around her head so it pulled the skin away from her sunken cheeks, making the cheekbones pronounced, the wide nostrils flared.

“Mukabwa, listen to me. I plead with you,” she said, her eyes fixed on him. “I am an old woman, and I am begging you. Give us our John so that we can get on our way before the rain starts. Please soften your heart, Mukabwa, and listen to us. Remember you are also of the clan, and that your day will come too; and that someone will do the same for you.”

“Listen, woman,” said Mukabwa gruffly, spinning around. “I have told you what needs to be done. I won’t repeat myself. And don’t you imagine that you can make me change my mind with your crocodile tears.”

“But you surely can’t be . . .”

“Ah, you can save your words for another occasion, woman. I am not here to bandy words with anyone. It is either you do as I say or you get out of here. You are blocking the way for other customers, you know. Or do you imagine that you are the only ones I have to attend to?”

“My son, Mukabwa,” pleaded the distraught woman, her eyes red-rimmed from the wailing. “Mind the words you say to people who are in mourning. Remember I am the age of your mother, and that I . . .”

“Ha! Are you now threatening me with a curse, woman?” said Mukabwa with a snide laugh. “Is that what you are saying now? Well, you can try it on someone else,” he said rising. “This one here is way beyond such old-woman nonsense. Now, I think I’ll go off for a drink. You people are making my head spin with your empty words that go round and round like a cobweb. As if a man can live on words. Or is it that you want me to give you the body as it is? Huh? Is that what you want, woman? If

that is the case, then go right ahead and collect it!” he gestured irritably at the open door. “The door is wide open, as you can see. Go right in!”

“I am begging you, Mukabwa,” said the woman, gazing at him reverently. “I am begging.”

“Now, get out of my office,” he ordered, reaching for the heavy wooden door that scraped the floor in a squeal when it was pulled. “Go on and join your other clans-people over there!”

And with that he swung the door closed and climbed down the stairs and away down the narrow path snaking through the overgrown hospital grounds towards the kiosk. He didn’t bother to lock the door. His was perhaps the only office in the world that one could leave unattended and go away on a long vacation without the fear of vandalism.

He whistled softly to himself as he went, his feet squelching in the muck that had spilled inside the oversize issue white Wellingtons. As he neared the kiosk he dipped his hands into his roomy pockets to take stock of his takings for the morning. The mostly low-denomination notes were grubby and crumpled in the manner of illegal earnings that are hastily stuffed away. The coins in the little fistful were equally grime-coated and nicked, like loose change that the initial owner wouldn’t mind giving away to a beggar. As he stared at the little bundle of money cupped in his huge, callused palm, a grin of satisfaction spread on his moist broad-jawed face. There was a sense of power in having a full pocket, regardless how the money had been arrived at. And he realized then just why he wouldn’t be quitting his job any time soon. He would certainly miss the amazing sense of power that came with it. And, boy, did one really need the miserly salary the hard-as-nails hospital cashier doled out at the end of the month, if they could find their own way about . . . ?

“You are early today, Mukabwa,” said the woman at the kiosk, handing him a plastic bottle through the rusty, mesh wire nailed to the hole in the front, even before he asked. “Business must be good today.”

Mukabwa offered her the grin the butcher reserves for the vultures who help clean up after the day’s business is done, and settled down on the creaky sway-backed bench by the kiosk, stretching out his legs. He rammed the base of the bottle twice against the heel of his hand, watching keenly as

the bubbles rose from the base to the top of the clear liquid. It was a practice he had picked up in the town shebeens, and which was supposed to verify the potency of the contents. Having ascertained he hadn't been cheated, he snapped the seal with his corny thumb and twisted the plastic cap. He took a long leisurely swig, and as his protruding Adam's apple jerked up and down in his throat he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Aaaah!" he sighed, rubbing the back of his hand over his wet lips.

"How does it feel today?" The kiosk owner was always asking him that, as if she had given him a slow poison that she was keen on knowing if it was having effect or not.

Mukabwa nodded and raised the bottle to his lips again. He was not in the mood for small-talk.

"Someone must have given you a rough time," she said at length, going back to arranging the bunches of *sukuma wiki* and pyramids of cherry-red tomatoes on the tray beside the counter.

Mukabwa nodded and tossed back the rest of the drink. Grimacing, he held up the empty bottle and eyed it malevolently from one eye, the other squinted against the midday light, before tossing it away to add to the pile of trash near the kiosk. He snapped his finger and the woman handed him another bottle through the mesh, which he similarly inspected and opened.

When he rose to leave a short while later, his eyes had reddened and retreated back into their deep pits, thick-knit eyebrows causing his forehead to slope further backward. He was whistling softly as he cut across the weedy field back to his office, the tails of his worn overcoat flapping against his wet Wellingtons.

"You really are not going to change your mind about this, are you, Mukabwa?" The woman he had turned away was by his side as he climbed the chipped cement stairs, tugging at his arm with her spidery fingers. She was in the company of three others who had joined her after he had gone off for the drink.

Mukabwa paused, his hand on the grime-coated steel handle of the heavy weather-beaten door. And as he slowly turned and leveled his gaze on them, the woman stepped back, surprised at the coldness in the depths of his now blood-shot eyes.

“Go away,” he said simply, but with a sinking finality. “I told you I do not eat grass. Do not make me repeat myself. I need money.”

Thereafter, he strode into his office, making for the far end of the row of wet cement slabs where he had left his slop-bucket. Without warning he picked up the three-quarter full bucket and poured the grey-black contents down the length of the room. The women shrieked and sprang backwards, filing out of the room, the thick-smelling viscid slop chasing them down the stairs.

On seeing the crestfallen women return bare-handed, the driver called to the spokesman of the little party and gave him a piece of his mind, gesticulating angrily at the thick grey cloud spreading steadily across the sky from the distant line of hills. Thereafter, he climbed into the cab and slammed the door shut.

There was little left to do. One of the grieving women unwound her headscarf and spread it on the ground. She then reached into the neckline of her white dress and drew out her little money-pouch from where it nestled next to her breast, held in place by a drawstring that passed around her neck. She fiddled with the string and drew out the few coins inside, counting them carefully against the sunlight, before tossing them on the scarf. The others took the cue and gathered around the scarf spread on the ground, each reaching for their money pouches.

The hospital administrator was getting ready to go for lunch after a hectic morning in which the hospital had grappled with a power and a water cut, all coming at the same time. In both cases, the administrator had to get on the phone and plead with the respective companies to reinstate their services and give him just a little more time to settle the huge sums the hospital owed. And matters had not been made easier by the circulating rumour that had reached his ear about an impending strike by the hospital staff, about their three-month overdue payments. He knew that all these activities were as a result of the much-publicized inspection visit the coming week, by a high-powered team from the Ministry headquarters.

It was as he circled the back of the administration block to access the staff parking at the back of the building that he saw the little party in the

grassless yard outside the morgue. It was the manner in which they were crowded around the scarf spread on the ground that captured his attention. He lingered to watch as one of them gathered the edges of the scarf and led the way towards the little stone building at the edge of the compound, carrying the little bundle in her hand, the others trooping after her.

Mukabwa counted the money a second time, just to make sure, and then put it away inside his pocket and, with a cold grin that barely reached his eyes, but which revealed his huge brown teeth, sent the woman who had brought it away so that he could do his job.

“I’ll be ready for you in five minutes time,” he assured her, locking the heavy door behind her.

Unknown to him, the hospital administrator was talking to the little party outside. It was a brief conversation that caused the administrator to forget completely about his lunch. Instead, he summoned one of the men to fetch a couple of hospital guards.

Inside the little morgue, Mukabwa was turning his customer over on the wet stone slab, preparing to hose him down.

“And you will be needing this bath badly, you fat oaf,” he said softly to himself as he inspected his stripped fare, tapping and straightening him out on the slab. “It’s going to be a real long while down there with the maggots and ants.”

It always amused him that he was the last one for whom they stripped, after their mother, the circumciser, the doctor, their spouses and their mistresses. And the goodness with his turn was that there were absolutely no reservations, be it with the minnows of the fields, or the very President of the land.

It had been quite a struggle, dragging this particular fare off the trolley onto the slab, for he was pretty well-fed; a little midget who must have consumed quite a number of granaries of grain in his lifetime—Oh, boy, won’t the grubs have a feast here!—and that stupid mocking smirk frozen on his face did not make matters any easier. It was as he adjusted his over-size rubber gloves and reached for the hand-held shower that he heard the banging on the door.

“I said you give me five minutes, didn’t you people hear me?” he shouted irritably, walking towards the door. Of all the things, he could hardly tolerate someone, no matter whom, interrupting his private moment with his fares. That was sacrilegious. And he was prepared to give them a thorough tongue-lashing for daring to . . . until he saw who it was at the door.

In the one-way glass on the door he could clearly make out the figures of the hospital administrator and the beefy guards, together with the villagers crowded behind them. He didn’t need for anyone to spell out to him why they were there.

“Open up inside there!” ordered Mukabwa’s boss, rattling the heavy door on its hinges.

He knew that they could not see him. However, that accorded him just the slightest of opportunities. He needed to find somewhere to hide the money; and pretty quick. When the guards went at it with their shoulders, that old door would come crashing in in no time.

“Hey, I’m coming . . . give me a minute!” called Mukabwa, his mind racing. All of a sudden he was like a mouse cornered in a room. And yet he had thought he knew his office well . . .

Frantically he looked about him, even as the door rattled on the rotting frame.

And at the very last minute, a brilliant idea occurred to him. He raced back to the work-table where his fare was spread out, stripped to the skin, waiting for his last bath. It was simply a streak of brilliant imagination, an idea that could never have occurred to anyone who wasn’t familiar with the place. *Mahali pema peponi*. That was just what he was looking for. A nice cozy place where the flies didn’t get. They would never find it there . . .

It was just after he was done emptying his pockets that the door came crashing in, yielding to the ramming from the shoulders of the beefy guards. Mukabwa turned around slowly and went to meet them, his hands raised in the manner of someone who had just been interrupted on a job that needed utmost concentration. There was a slightly puzzled expression on his face.

“What . . .?” he started to say, but the guards wouldn’t allow him to complete the sentence. They stormed in and seized him by the arms, pin-

ning him to the wall. It was as if the three of them had never enjoyed an after-work drink together back in the town shebeens.

“What’s going on?” Mukabwa demanded a second time, eyes wide with genuine surprise.

“You know what’s going on,” said the hospital administrator, in the calm voice he used with agitated staff who were baying for his head, his dark eyes gazing steadily into Mukabwa’s. “I’ve heard a lot of complaints about you. Thought you were too smart, eh? Well, your forty days are here. Where’s the money these people just gave you, Mukabwa?”

“What money, sir . . . I mean, what are you talking about?”

“Don’t give me that act, Mukabwa . . . you either produce the money or we get it from you. Now, which do you prefer?”

From the wet table beside, the still customer, who was at the centre of all the drama, watched in silence, his glazed eyes fixed in an unblinking stare. He was a scary enough sight with his bloated belly and puffed-up cheeks, and the guards were just barely keeping their cool. The courageous of the villagers stood in the doorway, horror written on their faces.

“One last time: Where is the money, Mukabwa?” demanded the agitated administrator.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, sir,” replied Mukabwa coolly.

“Okay. The strip-search it is, I suppose,” he said with a curt nod to the guards, who slackened their hold, allowing Mukabwa to slide to his feet.

It was a thorough search, every item of his clothing being peeled away and given a shake, down to the dirty Wellingtons. But at the end of it not a shilling was found on Mukabwa’s body.

“Very smart, eh?” said the administrator, his eyes glinting. “Well, we’ll shake the entire place down if we have to. And don’t you imagine you’ll scare us!”

And that was just what he did, with the help of the rather unwilling guards. Sending for a pair of latex gloves, he proceeded to draw out all the trays in which Mukabwa’s charges slept in their hallowed silence, the tiny numbered tags tied to their big toes; their only item of clothing. The few

of the villagers who still had the guts to watch, stood way back at the door, cringing inwards for an occasional glimpse.

But search the place as they would, not a cent would be found. Not even at the bottom of the slop bucket.

“Sir, what is all this about?” Mukabwa was asking all the while, his rounded gaze following his irate boss around as if he was trying to convince himself that the fellow had not lost his mind.

“Where is the money those people outside gave you?” demanded the administrator one last time, coming back to stand in front of the dumb-founded morgue attendant. “Where is it, Mukabwa?” he screamed. A film of moisture had settled on his face by then from the exertion.

“What money, sir?”

The look in the eyes of the other man spoke of defeat; but one that his pride could not allow him to express to his junior.

“Where is the money, Mukabwa?” he thundered, edging towards the morgue attendant as if he was ready to slap him. In response the morgue attendant stepped back, dumbstruck.

In the end, the administrator had to storm out in a defeated huff, his hands flailing, the mystified guards following close behind. “I’ll catch you,” he kept muttering to himself. “I’ll catch you, you foxy bastard. Some day.”

Behind them, the morgue attendant, his jaw still hanging slack in puzzlement, picked up his pants and slowly started getting dressed.

It was another five minutes after everything had calmed down that Mukabwa calmly went back to work. With the door locked, he walked back to his silent fare lying there on the table, a devious grin playing on his face.

“They have no manners now, do they?” he said softly to the silent fare. “Storming in here to desecrate our peace . . . a whole bunch of idiots they are.”

Pulling on his rubber gloves, he circled his silent fare, whistling softly to himself, until he came to the head of the table.

“Now hand it back, fat old fellow. We don’t want you taking it with you to that place yonder . . . I suspect they don’t accept our currency over

there. Nonetheless, I must give it to you; you acted pretty coolly back there. A good customer you are. And for that you know what I'll reward you with? I'll give you a perfumed bath . . . so that you smell like flowers for the angels when you get to the pearly gates, heh! Heh!"

And with the hearty laugh at his own joke, he pried open his customer's mouth and started extracting his money.