

Chapter 1 –Africa, My Africa

By good fortune - or so it seemed - the black African minister and his sophisticated and striking wife came to my hometown in search of an adventurous and unwavering soul to teach at their mission school in Uganda, East Africa. News of such rapidly spread throughout the Christian community, made its way to me, and I “signed up” for an interview. What a phenomenal opportunity! To live in Africa would translate to total human satisfaction, achieving the heights I had dreamed of for years.

My parents swore that ‘Africa’ was among my first few words. It was remembered that once old enough I would often head out to the backyard, grab the shovel and announce, “I’m digging to Africa, **not** China.” Too, it’s reported that I was always taken by anyone that didn’t sport white, gleaming skin. Later I realized these folks to often be more spontaneous and free-spirited than the culture in which I was immersed. Now, sitting face-to-face with a real African was over the top. I mean meeting this African minister was better than shaking hands with a movie star.

A church I was affiliated with had funded the minister’s Ugandan mission for years and was responsible for his sojourn to America. Good timing for us. Four years prior my son Peyton and I had taken a leap of faith and moved from Colorado to Anchorage, Alaska to experience the ‘end of the road’ and for me to attend the University of Alaska. My ex-husband’s occasional flings had gotten the better of me and I needed a strong dose of self-worth, wider skies and a degree in biology to alter my brain waves. Truly, there in the “Last Frontier” life was rousing and Peyton and I were doing just fine on our own.

While in town the Reverend and Mrs. Kozi interviewed many before zeroing in on me. After meeting twice, he phoned and requested that I bring my son for a third rally. After arrival, and

within minutes he announced his decision and heralded, “I have chosen you, that is, if you still want the position.”

This man, with a rich and romantic dialect, was most gracious, yet in charge. He was well-spoken and quick-witted. Uncharacteristically tall for a Ugandan, his height added to his charismatic demeanor and his dark coloring in contrast rendered his eyes and teeth surreal. More than anything though, his attire was stunning and his impeccably groomed facial hair was imposing. This was not the African from my dreams, but I didn’t care.

As he extended his right hand toward me, I felt flushed and unearthed. Somehow I managed to utter, “Uh, I need time to think about this.” Then I turned my eyes to the wife, for I felt her passive invitation.

You see there was one small hitch. The village house where we were to live wasn’t quite finished and the man suggested that I send money to finish the project. Besides that, somehow I sensed disapproval when I asked for more time to think. I feared that hesitation might cancel the deal. Within seconds I heard myself buying into the proposal with only the slightest of constraint. Eventually I was able to speak my concerns, however and boldly stated, “We still need time to think over the money part.”

At that, Reverend Kozi smiled reassuringly, looked into his wife’s eyes, and then turned and gazed into mine saying, “Of course you need time. But, we will need to ready the house and that will take months.”

The minister was taken by the allegiance I held to my forever African dream and said, “After all, you did promise to **live** in Africa and not just visit. Now you will live your dream. You will be in a jungle and maybe meet Tarzan. Yes?” At that the man threw back his head and gave a hearty laugh. I merely smiled.

Most of all, the man was taken with my degree choice. The praise was thick, as he ranted on about my scholastic background of biology. “You will be teaching much more than classroom reading and writing, by the way.” From there he detailed the job saying, “Sister Penny, this is an all-inclusive, family situation and you will be attending to matters concerning sanitation and agriculture, including how to keep crops vital. Please think family health care and literacy in the home, even malaria prevention.”

Peyton (“P” for short) was of noticeable value in that final meeting. Although reticent at times, my son was able to speak of his personal concerns and articulate appropriate questions. I can easily remember his continued and grave issues with food and if there was a McDonald’s in Africa. “What will we eat? Will Mommy fix it? Can we eat like we do here? Will we cook on a stove?”

The reverend’s answers were never satisfactory to my boy, so he finally turned to Mrs. Kozi for reassurance. “Of course your mother will fix your meals and there will be plenty of hamburgers there for you,” Mrs. Kozi insisted.

“What about school?” P eventually asked.

“I’m not sure of that, but I bet your mother has that taken care of,” said Mrs. Kozi. Her words were reassuring and I could perceive P’s belief in everything she said. “She will have assistance if she needs such. We will help.”

Sitting there conversing, words spilling into the room, passion fueled my zeal and temporarily threatened my composure. It was as though my whole existence spontaneously made sense. My “yes” reverberated through my mind again and again. At that precise moment though, I pulled myself down from the ozone to comprehend what was happening.

I nervously quipped, “It’ll take months to come up with all that money! Can I get it to you over the course of one year?”

“Sure, do what you can,” said the minister.

“If I for sure go with this, I’ll pay you \$250 a month until next May when I would come. I will finish my degree and go from there. In the mean time I shall search and read everything about Africa and Uganda that’s out there,” I concluded.

After that, we all sorta mumbled and giggled and that was it; meeting over. We did see the couple one more time before they took off for home and harvested a wealth of useable information. At that meeting I grew more and more invested as the moments snuck by. P kept quiet most of the time and let me do the talking. But then again, that surely didn’t mean I would miss out on his opinion. Once home he let it fly.

That third meeting took place exactly one year before I was to graduate. Actually the reverend’s timing was perfect, for it would certainly require at least one full year to prepare for such a migration. Peyton was 11 years old then and well immersed into a lovely Christian school. Decidedly, yanking him out of the school, the town and the country demanded tireless research and unyielding concern. Self-examination became a pastime, and I questioned my resolve. Those uncertainties were forwarded to the reassuring fact that *this* was a man of God after all.

More immediate than not, both Peyton and I began our research. It wasn’t necessarily a worrisome engagement, but one I simply took in stride. We said our prayers, too. I was constantly asking for answers and a steady mind, while P prayed for me to make good decisions. To our advantage, it was 1996 and political upheavals were minimal, even in Africa. Picture books, journals, travel accounts and even personal interviews shaped our days, as we read nothing but good reports. Although I could easily envision us in Africa, I knew it was prudent to lay low and ruminate upon the facts. And so I did.

Eventually I came to believe I had left no stone unturned and no question unanswered. But,

I was still waning, and couldn't fully commit. Deeply housed within were several notions, including my well-kept secret that I might have found a way to force the final commitment. A deepened desire to graduate with honors began to swell within and I figured that somehow moving to Africa should be fortified with a serious academic achievement. If I could attain cum laude status, which I believed to be impossible, I *should* then be savvy enough to make a successful transition to another world. Finally I resolved to stake everything on the numbers and move to Africa **only** if I 'made the grade.'

Central to all was the well-being of my son. Could I justify uprooting Peyton and transplanting him into a country of strangers where we would be left to survive pretty much on our own? During those confusing times I still held fast to my love affair with the continent. It had always been my energy source and I never doubted that I would someday live there. I knew my dream was a blessing and that it alone was responsible for the caliber of verve that kept me capable of leaping tall buildings. But this was not only about me--this was about my child. I had to remember that it was not his dream. It was mine.

As it turned out, and much to my surprise, the pastor was diligent about staying in touch. He would phone at least once a week. "How can the Reverend afford to call us so often?" P wondered aloud.

I had no answer except to say, "Well Sweetie, I guess they have a private telephone in their home and that's good news." Sometimes I would simply ignore all P's questions and give a lame response. "I'm not sure of anything, because I've never been there! Give me a break here." Really, preparing for our potential future while chasing excellence was exhausting and it nagged at me both night and day. Let's face it...I was tired.

Graduation was approaching, and that alone was keeping me in a spin. Sometimes it was

impossible to quiet my mind and my dreams would leave a trail of misgivings likened to something thick, indelible...threatening permanence of fear. I tried not to think about stains and permanence, but met each morning with hope and the belief that “God had me,” no matter the outcome.

Heading my list of academic hurdles was receiving an unacceptable grade (that is, anything less than an A) in one of my final courses—*Grazing and Browsing*. During registration I had opted for that particular class because of my fascination with hooved stock. Neglectfully, I gave little thought to the mechanics of the course.

Late in the semester and after a student gathering, a few of us got together and made a motion to the professor. We ended up proving the course to be pushing graduate level and convinced the professor to revise the final down a notch. I am happy to report I did get the A, and that was the remaining component to cement my final decision. Yes, we were moving to Africa and there would be no turning back now. Yikes! Africa; sobering thought that.

Graduation came with a huge party and cheers from many. However, it was Africa that was first on my mind. Three short months passed and our departure date of August was before us. Happily, our exit from America was enriched by a couple visits along the way. First we made a stopover in Denver just to see our “family of friends” we had left behind when moving to Alaska. Most importantly, we dropped by my hometown of Fort Worth and extended a hearty good-bye to my family. Naturally, my parents were not too thrilled about the move. In fact, my mom would vacillate between fear tactics and grumbling about all the wrong decisions I had made in my life.

My parents, originally from Michigan and Ohio, migrated to Texas before my birth. Both Mom and Dad embraced the conservative culture there and pretty much regarded foreign lands to be off limits. They perceived Africa to be nothing less than a looming threat controlled by savages, and the most volatile continent on the planet. Once my mom raised her voice saying, “I can’t

imagine a single, white woman and child all alone in that land of total doom.”

My dad described frightening scenarios saying, “Do you know they kidnap white women and turn them into slaves? What will Peyton do when he loses his mom?”

I worked to make sense of it all adding, “But listen you two, I have researched and studied for a solid year and know what I’m getting into. I wouldn’t risk my son’s life. I have a job and it’s with a minister!”

“But, he’s an African,” Daddy scoffed. “No telling what he believes in.”

“Well is he Baptist?” Mother chimed in.

While I worked to inject enough reason to mitigate their angst, they commiserated and finally revealed their biggest concern. They declared that their grandson would be forever lost or killed and they would never see him again. Mother acknowledged my preoccupation with Africa from what she called an “awfully young age,” but now confessed that she had always hoped I would never really go. It took true conviction to leave without their blessing, but in the end we said farewell and vowed to see them in six months.

After all the fanfare from friends and family, we were finally on our way and boarded a British Airways plane at the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. P and I had a case of the sillies and laughed all the way until we were seated. Funny how relaxed we were. As I squeezed P’s hand he looked up and smiled saying, “Here we go Mommy. It’s the adventure of our lives.” We had touched the side of the plane for good luck; not knowing why, and stepped inside. What seemed like forever had finally delivered us to the airways and my heart soared ahead of us all.

The ten-hour flight was uneventful, and we exited the plane at London’s Gatwick Airport on time, and ready for the city. Neither of us had slept, for we were enlivened to the heights. We were scheduled to spend three days in London and were even picked from the airport. A friend from

home was living there at the time and she had offered to share her flat for the duration. Her apartment had two bedrooms, so I settled for the couch, allowing P to go to sleep early that first night.

Because my sleep pattern had been turned upside down, I purposely left the television on all that evening to be soothed by the noise. In the early morning hours as I lay in a state of slight slumber, alarming words came into my consciousness. At first I thought it was all part of a dream, then I rallied and began to rationalize my whereabouts. I focused. The television newscaster announced Princess Diana's death. I sat up and cried out, "Oh God, Princess Diana has been killed!" I then ran into my friend's room, repeating the same words as I approached her bed.

"What's going on Mommy?" rang from the other bedroom. Peyton came hobbling out, still in a state of sleepiness. "Who is killed?" he demanded.

"Princess Diana was killed in a car crash!" I blurted out. After that there was nothing left but the sound of the newscaster's voice. We didn't venture out until late that day. The streets were filled with mourners and our friend was reluctant to deal with the crowds. We eventually returned to the flat where the day ended early, as we faded off into silent sadness.

Diana's death and the plethora of stories that followed left me in quite a state of disbelief. Because of this, I took a bit of time and talked things over with P. Somehow, I became entangled in the ordeal and even took it personally. It gave me pause, and I can still remember the waves of unease that temporarily engulfed me. I just wanted to somehow confirm that I was doing the right thing and that we would be safe.

"I understand the sadness," P added, "But why do you seem so worried?"

"Do you realize the gravity of our situation? Can you comprehend that we are actually moving to Africa?" I pressed. "I just hope I am doing all the right things." Peyton finally gave it

up, and so did I, for the most part. Exhausted, we both went to bed and had the best sleep we had experienced in days.

Although we originally had no plans to lengthen our stay in the U.K., the idea that Scotland was within a reasonable distance from London, literally “just up the road,” spoke to me. After all, in addition to Africa, Scotland held a special place in my heart. With that kind of proximity, who could blame me? It was a rather quick diversion of four days and three nights and we were back on track again.

While on the road we stopped at a post office and placed a call to Kampala and the mission office. We had nailed down the day and time of our arrival, and it was time to let them know. It was about eight in the morning when the reverend’s voice came through the receiver and filled my ear. “Hello, Reverend Kozi speaking. May I help you?”

“This is Penny,” were the only words that would roll out of my mouth. For reasons unidentifiable I froze after that and just looked at Peyton.

“Yes Sister Penny, we have been waiting for your call. Are you well? Where are you? How is Peyton?” These were the nagging questions I could hear, but just could not answer! Still today I can recall the spine-tingling sensation that gripped me, refusing to let go. His voice seemingly brought about a weird trepidation that was stunning. Perhaps it was the closer proximity, but I had never felt such foreboding in America.

Moments past and I easily perceived the discomfort from the other end of the line. Finally I uttered, “We are in Glasgow, Scotland and will be arriving Tuesday morning at 7:30.”

“We will pick you, no problem,” was his return. After that I made an excuse and simply got off the phone. Of course Peyton heard and saw the happening. He was full of suspicion.

“What happened to you, Mommy? You were rude to the minister,” P said. I made up some

excuse and even tried forgetting about the whole occurrence. Meanwhile, I plugged away at convincing myself I was just feeling skittish concerning our actual arrival.

That night instead of sleeping I tossed and turned while trying to make sense of my secret discomfort. Eventually my mind wandered to Mrs. Kozi. I well remembered the kindness in her eyes that I saw that day back in Anchorage. Oh those eyes; they were quiet and deep as pools of water. Too, I appreciated her stature, for she was attractively large and commanding. She gave me hope, and I focused on anticipation of her hug.

After all, I wasn't too far off. At the mission I would be told that this reserved and dignified woman was recognized for having a spiritual power. Of course, I would find this alluring, for it was not in any way connected to her husband's agenda. She was strong and stood solid. I knew within my heart that I could trust her, and Peyton heartily agreed. Still, there was a general unease and it weighed heavily upon me, yet I told no one and conducted my part with a peaceful resignation. Besides all that, it was literally too late to turn back now.

Chapter 2 – Old Dirt

The moment the plane touched down in Entebbe at Uganda’s International Airport, south of Kampala, I was 100% in. I mean, there lay the whole basket of goodies before my very eyes. All was worth the stress, the angst, the constant need for reassurance, and of course the money. My elation was irretrievable and unleashed. I probably would have trusted a known thief at that moment. Deplaning onto Africa soil was nothing less than captivating. Without hesitation I knelt to the ground, kissed my hand and laid it upon the tarmac. I closed my eyes and softly spoke, “I’m finally home. Thank you God!” It was as though I had reached the pinnacle of my entire existence. There I was with my precious son at my side, standing upon the land that had forever filled my heart. That was all I could comprehend, at least for the moment.

After customs and immigrations had their way with us, including two \$60 entrance visas, we declared nothing and received treasured stamps on our passports. We slowly marched out of one room, immediately into another and finally ended up in an even larger room with dozens of people waving placards above their heads. Inventorying the crowd, we immediately spotted a “Penny and Peyton” sign among the others, right in the middle of all the confusion.

“I think that’s them,” yelled P. “There’s Mrs. Kozi up front.” There they stood, a group of many extending their lips upward with hands clapping, beaming from ear to ear. Some were holding those placards high and the jumbo-sized red letters appeared almost neon.

A crowd of many were shouting, “Welcome, our American guests,” and they were looking squarely at us. “You are welcome,” was their continuous mantra. I was overcome with heightened emotion to the point of extreme embarrassment. I had never been the center of attention in such a way. I’m telling you, it was like we were celebrities. Later we learned that it was customary for large groups to travel to the airport to receive visitors. They were there to “pick” us and assure our

comfort and safety back to Kampala.

Entebbe Airport is surprisingly small in comparison to its location, and we were outside in the African sun in moments. Reverend Kozi ordered someone to retrieve our bags, and we followed him to his car. Again, my delight held me hostage and I knelt to grab a piece of earth. Yep! The dirt was old, for it smelled old; it was riveting. This was Africa.

Once reaching the car, we were expected to hop into the back seat. We waved goodbye to the others as they dispersed, accessing public transport back to Kampala. A turn of the key and the engine roared. We were on our way! As we slowly motored the 35 km. from Entebbe to Kampala we were suddenly bathed in a heavy fragrance I had never experienced before. “What’s that smell?” asked P. “Is it food? I’m hungry.”

“Yes Peyton, but it is also what is used for cooking the food,” said the Reverend. “It is actually a mix of paraffin, wood smoke, probably some charred meat, and for sure, steaming bananas.”

“Mommy, can we eat when we get there? How long will it take?”

“Sure, sure. We will eat,” replied Mrs. Kozi.

There, alone in the back seat, I secretly frowned at P, for I thought he was too demanding. But more importantly, I was focused on what was the original scent, for it was fading and lost within the inordinately thick, vehicular exhaust. I made effort to memorize the bouquet and disregard the rest. This is not to be taken lightly. Until this day, both Peyton and I know that fragrance all too well. Most of Uganda retains this distinctive ambiance and we mentally wallow in it when it first hits our nasal passages.

We learned lots on the way to the guesthouse. I was ready to absorb, and my questions never ended. “What’s steamed bananas about? Is that the reason the air is full of steam?”

Once again the minister answered saying, “Yes Sister Penny, that is our national staple, called matoke. It’s simply steamed bananas. You will love it.” After that, the minister talked on about how little wood there was in Uganda because of dwindling forests. He gave us an earful about the value of charcoal and how dear it was. After that he discussed the use of paraffin and how it would become our best friend. We had no idea what that meant at the time.

The ride to Kampala city center was long and I was fidgety the whole way. Once there I asked to stop at a bank so that I could exchange my American dollars for Ugandan shillings. Too, we had quite a bit of money on us and I wanted to open an account. All these things had been discussed earlier, so the couple was prepared to make the stop. Before we knew it we had pulled up to a rather modern, yet post-colonial, red brick building. The reverend parallel-parked and all four of us got out of the car.

“This is the most secure banking institution in all Kampala,” the Reverend informed us.

“I remember reading about the guns,” P interjected. “Everyone has them.”

“No,” said Mrs. Kozi, “Only the guards, police and military. They protect the bank.”

We approached the bank and passed the two guards holding automatic rifles who stood on each side of the heavy glass doors. On entrance, we began to search for the first available teller. Waiting our turn, we eventually strolled up to a window manned by a distinguished, yet frightfully thin, young black man in a dark suit and yellow-striped necktie. He was ever so handy and smooth with the transaction and I recall thinking how ordinary the whole process seemed...except for the big guns.

At the end of our business Mrs. Kozi counted the money I had received in the exchange for my dollars. She was quick to point out that the man had cheated me by thousands of shillings (roughly \$100). While I confronted him, the teller insisted we were wrong, yet all along gushing

apologies, but never offering to recount the money. At the same time, the wife was persistently whispering in my ear, “This is no place to put your money, Sister Penny.”

After all the counting and absorbing the spewing of advice that had been irritatingly tickling my ear, it was established that we had caught the young teller straight away and exposed his shenanigans. By that time the other bank tellers had been alerted and a couple came to my aid, each one of them gushing apologies and assuring me it was nothing more than an innocent mistake.

Everyone was saying, “Sorry. Sorry,” again and again; two “sorrlys” at a time.

The abundance of apologizing took me aback, for it appeared wholehearted, although no one took any responsibility. Next came the preacher’s unexpected diatribe, as he seized the opportunity to berate the man with a rueful vengeance. He demanded to know how he could commit such a crime and sleep at night.

“Don’t you know the Lord is watching you?” he ranted.

Peyton and I didn’t know what to think about any of this except we had read that banks and money always meant trouble in Africa. Although I knew to be constantly alert and to closely monitor any exchange of money, this was all happening too fast. Ultimately I withdrew from the situation and let the “man of God” handle the whole thing.

Yes, it was odd that I was surprised at the blatant attempt to cheat me. After all, I had been informed, educated and lectured in regard to suchlike matters for more than a year. Questions regarding where and how to be safe flooded my mind as I heard the Mrs. sharply inquire, “You won’t put any money in this bank, will you?”

All I recall was my open mouth and the syllable “uh” coming out. Not at all sure what to do or think, we turned to our trusted sponsors. After all, the two of them had given us many scenarios depicting the deplorable and ruthless state of affairs in African banks. From the beginning they both

had written letters and made phone calls in an attempt to prepare us for the move and caution us on the Ugandan banking system.

At the time Mr. and Mrs. Reverend were ever so irate and gave to forcing their opinion on us. I had trusted them all along, even to the point of forgoing traveler's checks, as they insisted that most banks would not cash them. And so, in the end P and I locked eyes, shrugged our shoulders and I acquiesced. "Forget the bank," I agreed, "but then where **do** we put our money?"

Our hosts replied in unison, "At the guesthouse!" As exhausted as we were, we were too drained to make another decision. For now we would simply sit back, enjoy the ride and the city sights that would soon give way to an even thicker blur of vehicular dust.

Later I would write in my journal about the thin, dark, young bank teller and his perplexing behavior. I noted that during the entire incident the man was never noticeably off guard. Although, once confronted he surrendered completely. He was profuse with platitudes, possibly detecting that this was our first day in Uganda. His smile was as believable as a five-year-old's. This was our first strong indication that we might not know so much about the African mindset.

As we withdrew from the banking area of town, we were off to see the guesthouse where we had agreed to stay until our home at the mission school was completed. We became increasingly anxious as we took stock of where we were headed, realizing we were leaving the big city behind.

By the time we reached Hoima Road in Nakulabye, Kampala's Old Town, we had entered a world that was somewhere between village and industrial. Mostly it was poor. The main road was paved, but given to continuous potholes that housed a great deal of smelly decay and never-ending red clay. The clouds of red dust, coupled with the seriously thick, black sediment from the many passing lorries almost rendered our air source clogged. You could pretty much taste it.

About then we pulled off the road. In the midst of many run-down buildings and shacks sat our temporary home...the guesthouse. We were pleased at first glance, as it outshined all other surrounding buildings. We particularly appreciated the no “mzungus” (white people) status of the area, all along assuming “Old Town” to be a precious and preserved section of the city.

As the Reverend’s late model Toyota Corolla slowly eased inside the protective compound that surrounded the guest quarters, the gateman closed the 12-foot, cast iron frame behind us. I was thinking, “Why the secrecy?” Before we could inquire if the gate remained shut at all times, the car was swarmed. Members of the “extended church family” had gathered with our airport greeters for an official welcoming. They, like the airport greeters, were all singing and waving their hands while preparing to receive us from the car. This was traditional Ugandan etiquette, which remains active even today.

The greeting ritual is just one of the many practices we have always held dear. As a mzungu, the most common sentiment you will ever hear, other than “Sorry, Sorry,” is one of welcoming. Proper manners and politeness often outweigh truth in Ugandan culture and that should never be forgotten.

Whites hold an excess of power in most of Africa, whether they desire it or not. The British and European colonists forced their cultures on the natives in the name of religion, civilization and commerce. Ugandans continue to uphold some of the same standards and some of the old practices of the British imposed in the late 19th Century. Imperial powers eradicated almost all of Ugandan’s original culture, leaving behind confusion with little trace of nationalism or collective self-esteem.

We would often hear that one never really knows what an African is thinking. Taking that into account, Peyton and I still believe the emotions expressed on that first day were honest and true. Everyone appeared genuinely grateful to take in our Western ways and us. Even today, we not

only believe in it, we depend upon it.

High-spirited was the crowd and the singing, dancing, and clapping spilled onto us in heaping proportions as we stepped from the car. The festivities temporarily halted at this juncture with the minister's announcement that we were tired and needed to rest before the welcoming could continue. "Please clear the way now," were his words. Everyone obeyed and stepped back as we followed the couple into the building.

A small group followed us through the courtyard and into the building's reception area. There in front of a small window was a brown counter that was covered in deep gouges in the wood. The clotted dust worked to hide the insults. Against one wall stood a dilapidated, stained and torn couch and a white plastic chair was positioned against the opposite wall. Unfortunately, the window provided just enough sun to illuminate everything all too well, revealing tattered curtains and rampant wear and tear.

As we turned, we faced a very dark, long hallway lined with several doors on each side. The corridor smelled of something chemical; something we had never smelled before. The room doors weren't made of ordinary wood, but of very stout teakwood, dark and suggestive. They were obviously hand-carved, equipped with a slot for a corresponding skeleton key. Our room was the last one on the right. As we stopped in front of the locked door, I was handed the key. I gasped quietly, yet it was just loud enough to be heard. Peyton peered into my eyes and then took charge, relieving me of the duty.

P's little hand turned the key and the door swung open. There it was, worse than I could have ever imagined: a large room with a bed covered from above by a heavily stained mosquito net that was nailed to the ceiling. There was an end table and another long table and a dirty floor in between. Mrs. Kozi seemed embarrassed and offered, "The maids will be cleaning. They forgot

your room.” As she spoke, my attention wandered to the opposite wall that was comprised of two large wooden doors, which I didn’t bother to open. To relieve the palpable tension, both P and I smiled as we turned to face our keepers. They smiled and we all stood there smiling together.

Eventually the Mrs. said we should take an hour to rest. “Sure thing!” I sputtered as they slowly backed away and were swallowed by the darkness of the corridor. When the door finally closed, I fell back against it and sorrowfully moaned to my sensitive one, “Oh God, what have I done?”

Peyton squeezed my hand and said, “Don’t worry, Mommy. We will unpack our stuff and arrange the furniture to make it work.”

His courage was overwhelming. Naturally we were inquisitive about the two wooden doors and eventually opened them, discovering dozens of drawers arranged side by side. There were no hangers and everything had to be folded to fit into narrow cubes. Next, I turned toward the bathroom. This took guts! There was a commode with no cover and a large showerhead in one corner protruding from the wall. The room was quite large and it was obvious that the water would merely fall to the ground, splashing everywhere, as there was no shower curtain.

It didn’t take long to discover what I deemed to be our first African pet...a cockroach the size of my thumb! Peyton noticed it first and yelled, “Watch out!”

“My gosh, P, what’s wrong?” I bantered back, making an attempt to reach the door. Then I spotted it. Peyton immediately turned toward the large aerosol can sitting on the bathroom floor. The word “DOOM” was written on the side of it with a picture of a bug. Without hesitation I grabbed it from Peyton’s hand and sprayed the life out of the roach. After, I slumped down into one of the two chairs and wept as Pee sat quietly next to me holding my hand.

“Mommy, this will all work out. Remember how much you love Africa,” were the words

my sweet son poured out. That made the difference and I dried my eyes and hugged my boy ever so tightly. We returned to the dead bug, looked for non-existent toilet paper, and finally scooped him up in a plastic bag we had brought from home.

Exactly one hour later the minister's house girl Florence summoned us. She knocked on the dense, wooden door so faintly we barely heard her. That was followed by an even fainter voice saying, "Sister Penny, you are expected." Somehow the words made it to our ears and we unlocked the door. As we followed her back down the black hall, she advised us to keep up with the key because it was the only one.

"You mean no one has a duplicate?"

"No, Madam, there is just the one," she returned.

"What do we do if it is lost," I insisted.

"I do not know, Madam," was her only return.

We followed Florence outside where the Toyota was parked. The compound extended far past the car to a separate covered area filled with more white plastic chairs and some white plastic tables to match. Later we would discover those chairs to be nearly a national symbol, as they are found everywhere. At the back of the room was another door that led to an expansive kitchen with space enough for many. Several women were in the first room, moving slowly while preparing the refreshments in a cheerful and enthusiastic manner. As before, we were immediately surrounded when the gatherers saw our faces. Within minutes the singing and dancing began again. There were no instruments; just voices singing in unison and praising God for our safe arrival.

"Please take your seats at the head of the room," the Reverend commanded us. "The ladies are to come," he announced to the room.

Just then the ladies entered from the kitchen with trays of various soft drinks and plates

upon plates of small cakes. This, too, was tradition. The well-wishers engulfed Peyton and began petting his head, enthralled with his blonde hair. “Oh, what a sweet boy you are!” came the remark of one woman and another kept kissing his cheeks. Poor P hated it, but worked to hide his awkwardness.

At the same time, multitudes of questions were fired at me, one after another. “How old are you? Where in America do you live? Why do you only have the one boy?” I could make out most of their words, despite the thick Lugandan dialect. English is still widely spoken in Uganda; particularly in the city. This, too, was a holdover from British colonization. Various tribes filled the urban centers; each with its own language. A common language, like English, greatly simplified communication and helped to offset cultural divides.

The party extended well into the night and by the time most had taken leave for their homes, P and I were weary. During the evening we had been swamped with information. Some insisted that we learn a few Lugandan words while others were bullish on cultural enlightenment. The “icing on the cake” was the dance. I was oozing delight when asked if I wanted to give it a try. Hands on, personal involvement such as this was big—really big! I was eager to tell about my love for dance, but believed it would not be taken seriously.

As P and I stood there watching, I was mesmerized by their excellence and couldn’t turn away. The trick was to isolate the hips from every other part of the body, rotating them remarkably fast while advancing forward one footstep at a time. “Awesome,” I shouted as I stood before them. Naturally, I made every effort to relax my body and allow my hips to circulate in isolation. Once they caught me practicing alone in a corner of the room and the ladies were greatly amused that I was trying so hard. They laughed and teased, but made no attempts to ridicule.

”Don’t worry, you will do... someday,” they consoled me. “You are too tired for this try.

Wait until tomorrow,” they urged.

At that point there was nothing left to do but retire to the “aisle of doom,” and on to our room. “Peyton, lets buy a flashlight tomorrow,” I whispered, trying to disguise my overwhelming fear. The electric was on at the time, but it was obvious that the candle in our room had a purpose.

P was holding the key and once again he unlocked the door and we stepped inside. Making sure to conceal my aversion, I spoke of nothing but the sweet contentment of being “home.” We had prepared to live in the village; the bush was to be our playground and the trees were said to be plentiful. Instead, everything around us was urban: concrete, dusty, loud and worse! Secretively I was grateful that I had what it took to pass through that corridor and into that room without asking Peyton for reassurance.

“Well, I guess it’s about time we get ready for bed, huh Sweetie?” I cheerfully asked. Getting into that bed was going to be the real test, though. I was exhausted, but giving into the bed was gong to be hard, especially because of the enormous roach we killed. I feared an attack from his relatives during the night. Nervously I chattered and immediately began to unpack. “Now all I need to do is find the sheets from home.”

“Here, let me help you look,” P said as he began to shuffle through our belongings. “Gosh Mommy, you brought everything we’ll ever need. We have no reason to worry.”

Back then, airline weight restrictions were lax and we were permitted four jumbo duffle bags that were filled with items designed to maximize our comfort. I knew our surroundings might be rough and I did all I could to address our Western needs. Nonetheless, never did I foresee such stark austerity, old dirt and the threat of enormous bugs. To make matters worse during our inventory of furnishings and supplies, the repugnant odor of the latrine located just outside our barred, open window inundated our olfactory senses.

“What’s that horrible smell?” Peyton asked in disgust. “I’ve never smelled anything that bad before. Uh, maybe we should wear masks. I wonder if the bugs...uh, I mean, they might crawl into the bed with us. Where should I put our kitchen stuff?”

“Don’t worry about that. Lets get this done so we can go to bed,” I ordered. Unpacking the cleansers, bedding, incense, photos, coverings for furniture, plastic gloves, plates, cups, utensils, clothespins, tons of toiletries and books did help to keep me sane. “No P, bugs can’t crawl up into our bed. We will tuck the bed clothes under the mattress.” I looked up and stared at the filthy, years-old mosquito netting that was intended to drape over the entire bed. Fear of being touched by it almost got the better of me. Nonetheless, we eventually came to terms with this dismal affair by remembering the roach. For us, the net was much more about keeping the creepy crawlers out than the malaria mosquitoes.

For a moment I stood there considering the net. Even though most of Equatorial Africa sleeps under one, we have always found it to be a pointless exercise. Malaria mosquitoes fly in the early evening hours when people are still awake and active. Once full darkness sets in, they fly away. That night we elected to use the dirty netting, but it wasn’t long before we chose to forgo it. That night we were able to tuck it tightly and to my knowledge it never touched either of us.

Most importantly, before getting into bed I took charge and hid the bag with our money and Visa card. Stepping across to the cabinet, I reached all the way to the back, dug deeply with my fingers and carefully placed the bag between two cubicles. It was stuffed flat and I was confident it was safe. As P said, “No matter what, we have the only room key.”

“That’s true, and it will be with us at all times,” I promised. “We will put it in my money pouch and take it everywhere around my neck.”

“Let me wear it,” Peyton pleaded. “Oh please, Mommy, let me! We’ll put our shillings in

it, too. They'll never suspect me. I'm the kid."

I agreed that it sounded good, but I had no plans of letting my child carry anything. We were savvy about pickpockets and knew never to keep money on your person, unless it was in a money pouch and hung around your neck, out of sight. "You just never mind about that, P. You are too young."

Once the sheets were changed, the money was hidden and our teeth were brushed we hopped into bed. At one point I said a prayer thanking God for our safe arrival. After that, I promised my child that we would soon be out of the city and in the bush. Considering all the money we had paid to the Reverend, I was confident that the house would soon be finished.

The following day we were up early moving our few items about the room and stringing pieces of cloth we had brought. Our interior design was comprised of these swatches and a few chairs and tables. Together there was enough to section off areas of the room and dress it according to its function. Peyton created a dandy little nook that he christened "the official kitchen." Even still, the outside toilet and numerous stains were still of great concern.

Even though I did all I could to hide my angst, it was perceived. It wasn't long before the women were making serious efforts to ease the strain. We received a white, plastic table from the kitchen, along with our own flask and electric coil for heating water. The flask was dented, and most of the paint was scratched off, but it was clean inside. The water, coil, and flask are the components needed to make tea. They naturally assumed we drank tea, and graciously offered these things. But then again, they couldn't find a suitable cooking pan and we waited on it for two days. By the end of our second day we had collected a room full of furniture and all the makeshift comforts a mom and son could want (sort of).

Once Florence, the house girl, discovered our methods of sectioning the room, she brought

more pieces of cloth borrowed from some of the ladies. By the third day we were able to install our living area and bedroom. To hear the Ugandans depict our “remodeling” was most flattering. They were taken by our inventions and entertained by our imaginations. No matter what we did, we were praised—and watched closely. The Reverend’s men were always nearby, organizing our evening hours and preparing us for village life. When Peyton needed a separation, they would play ball with him; in the meantime the women would teach me to cook traditional dishes.

All the attention was reassuring and we were able to accept and even enjoy our surroundings within those couple days. That brand of Ugandan affection is sincere and it couldn’t help but soften our hearts and foster tolerance. It wasn’t as though we were searching for love, as are so many Westerners, but instead we were wooed by the dedication to our every need. Too, I was taken by their deliberation over Peyton, which really helped me to ignore inconveniences. All in all, P and I were remarkably at ease in a place that was ever so foreign and rough.

We arrived on a Tuesday, and things got moving immediately. Each day was filled with different places to visit and various people to meet. One by one, the ladies volunteered to show us the sights. Once outside our room we were fair game for anyone taking a turn entertaining us. We were never left alone. All travel was limited to our feet, or a matatu if significant distance was involved.

This matatu, or minivan, is used for transporting people. Only authorized drivers operate them and today they are licensed to carry only 14 passengers. An attendant sits in the back and is responsible to collect the fare as he opens and shuts the sliding side door for people to come and go. Back then these vans were always seriously overcrowded. Although P was 12, he often was forced to sit on my lap with people leaning heavily into him.

Riding in these vehicles was dangerous then and remains so today. Experienced drivers take

charge, but they also take chances. When passing, running smaller cars off the road is still common. Nonetheless, the attendants were always cordial and I was impressed with the assistance they offered to anyone who needed it—young and old.

At first we weren't at ease enough to board one, but Peyton and I eventually took advantage of the situation, if nothing more than to ascertain facts about Ugandan culture. With English so commonly spoken, we became privy to the everyday topics that aroused the interests and concerns of the people. Of course, we did not enjoy the annoying overcrowding, which included the various items that others brought on board. We were usually asked to sit at the rear of the van, occasionally with chickens that would invariably extend their necks to peck at our feet. This would get under our skin, literally, resulting in rampant irritability on both our parts.

To ease tension, P would sing songs that revealed his inner most aversion. "Every time I look around, it's in my face," often bellowed out when a large individual squeezed by. He made them up, as well. "Poor little boy getting picked on and shoved? He wants to fly away just like a dove."

We were amazed by the number of people who knew plenty about politics and the state of their country. The daily newspaper was a significant part of everyone's life and it was common for many to share just one, passing it around until most everyone had absorbed their day's worth of information. It was refreshing to find Ugandans so inquisitive and aware of world affairs. In general, Kampala society turned out to be an interested and caring one, full of curious people who were always up for a worthwhile exchange.

When a Ugandan, urban or otherwise, would greet us and ask how we were doing, it usually seemed sincere. As a rule, they remembered everything we had told them and never failed to inquire about our current circumstances. Although many were pandering for a personal cause, the majority

actually cared...or so we chose to believe. The country's mantra, "You are welcome," always felt genuine.

Returning their gestures of kindness, I often memorized names and stories as though I would be tested on them later. This meant the world to them and they expressed deep gratitude each time. My conduct with these soft, fun-loving people was free flowing and relaxed from the start, without effort or self-awareness. When in Uganda, there is an all-encompassing feeling of belonging, sponsored by an obvious spiritual strength. God is important to the majority of these people and sharing such provides equal footing and respect. I could not help but feel at home.

By that Friday we had made it to city centre twice, visited in many private homes, seen a few commercial huts near Hoima Road in our area of town, and even stopped in at the local hospital to visit the minister's mother-in-law.

Our fourth day in Africa turned out to be the best. We were escorted to the home of Martin and Gertrude, dear friends of the Kozi family, where we were the guests of honor at a traditional dinner with all the trimmings. Despite his appreciation, Peyton had a problem with the cuisine and privately groused about the fat-laced meat, threatening not to eat it. I was greatly embarrassed when he refused to partake of the traditional gnut sauce, vowing aloud that it made him gag. Not that I could blame him, for gnut sauce is made from peanuts and sardines and tastes as though it has "gone off," or worse. Thankfully, he was able to eat the greens as well as some rice, which was his choice among the four starches added to the meal.

Dessert was followed by a relaxing stroll down the road to another house where our host and hostess had prepared a surprise. The entire neighborhood had arranged an exhibition of local musicians and several dancers, both male and female. I was thrilled and even shed a few tears. The attempts they made to please our Western curiosities were touching and I was thankful for every

kind word and deed they offered.

But, in Africa things are often not as they seem. This same Friday was the day I began to display symptoms of illness. It was late in the afternoon when I sparked an unusually intense headache. I surmised it was a mere reaction to the harsh sun. “Peyton,” I whispered, “I feel like Cujo, you know... the rabid dog from the movie. My head is thrashing and I’ve never felt such pain.”

“What happened? You seemed OK at lunch,” P insisted.

“I don’t know, but it came on all of a sudden. I feel like a rabid dog out here in the sun. Help me go inside somehow. I feel like I’m gonna throw up.” And we did go inside. I made up an excuse, hid my suffering and asked to take cover somewhere. Late that evening it became obvious that I had become far less tolerant and practically unwilling to deal with the same inconveniences I had previously forgiven. “I can’t stand the smell of that urinal another day!” I protested. My forbearance was wearing thin as the pain had progressed to my neck and even more to my arms. By Saturday morning I was vomiting and by nightfall I had spiked a significant fever.

“Peyton, I’m pretty sick. I think there’s really a problem here. I’m not sure what to do.”

“Tell Mrs. Kozi, she will know what to do.”

“I don’t know what to tell her. Every time I start to ask her what to do, I seem to get better. Maybe it’s my imagination. I mean, right now I feel fine.”

“Your imagination doesn’t make you throw up. And, what about your aching arms and head? I believe you are really sick.”

As one might expect, this perplexing on-again/off-again state gave rise to self-doubt and questioning any legitimacy of illness. But, by Sunday I was unable to leave my bed. The illness had advanced dramatically. My temperature was approaching 101 degrees and the pain in my head was

unbearable. Finally I gave in and went to Mrs. Kozi. “What can I do? I feel there is something seriously wrong. Should I see a doctor?”

“I will make sure someone is here to see you in the morning,” she agreed.

Monday finally arrived and with it came a house call from a local doctor. He took one look at me and promptly diagnosed malaria. I disagreed because both Peyton and I had started a daily anti-malaria medication two weeks before our arrival. My doctor at home guaranteed it would prevent the disease. There could be no way I had contracted it. Besides, I had only been there four days. The doctor stuck to his convictions and said, “You must take this seriously, Madam. Malaria is a very dangerous disease and you can die,” he said. “You must begin taking the pills today.”

“Thank you for coming, but I will go to town tomorrow and see the British doctor,” I replied. “He is supposedly very good at diagnosing.” The reverend’s wife had been told that was the prudent thing to do and I was in no shape to disagree.

By day’s end I was beginning to think I was going to die. Earlier I rallied and had begun to feel fine. Was I ill or not? Was this the trepidation I first suffered in Scotland? Had I come all the way to Africa to simply fall ill and die? What was I to do, and what about Peyton?

Chapter Three – Malaria Days

The second day of the new week brought real freedom as Peyton and I were finally allowed to leave the guesthouse on our own. Early that morning I had experienced a period of remission and felt well enough to cancel my plans to see the British doctor. Still, I did paid attention to the advice and concerns of the minister's wife and promised to seek out the clinic should I feel the need.

We headed for the upscale area of Kampala and took in the sights along the way. We were so happy to be on our own that my intermittent sickness was somewhat ignored. This one occasion was rich with exuberance, and that energy was all that was necessary to propel me onward. I pledged to stay upright and make the most of our day. I was dedicated to the cause, and the immediate cause was the Sheraton Hotel where I would purchase mounds of ice cream for Peyton.

In that we were still both a bit shy, we decided to forgo the matatu and foot it all the way to the hotel. By the time we reached our destination we had trekked more than 12 miles, most of it uphill. Until this day neither P nor I can conceive of how I performed such an arduous feat. All I can offer is that “mind over matter” often works.

“I can't wait to get to the hotel! Maybe we could stay there one night, Mommy,” Peyton said.

“Oh, I don't know about that. I'm sure it's crazy expensive.”

We finally made it to Nile Avenue and strolled up to the Sheraton gate. At that time there were only guards for security and you could simply walk in. The outside café was quite inviting, and it was a perfect day. We took our seats and soon the waitress came. “We'll have two dishes of your vanilla ice cream please,” I ordered. “Oh, and stick around; the young boy might want seconds.”

Wouldn't you know it, just as she brought the dishes I fell ill again. I even became

disoriented and couldn't decide what to do. I turned to P. Without hesitation, he literally dragged me to a floor above the mezzanine and placed me on a lounge where I could lie down. By then I was unable to make sense of anything, let alone walk. "I'm going for help!" he said, and with that he ran downstairs in search of someone; anyone to help. Soon after, Peyton showed up with a very serious hotel manager.

"Madam, we cannot do anything to help if you are not a hotel guest," he explained as his frown begged for my attention.

"Call a taxi. I think I'm terribly ill and I can't stand up," I returned.

"I'll help Mommy downstairs sir, if you would call the taxi," Peyton offered.

The private hire was already at the front door once we made it down. P helped me into the back seat. Once we arrived at the British High Commission and Clinic Peyton practically had to carry me inside. My temperature was now 103. The doctor at the clinic took me seriously and offered to personally transport me to Kololo Hospital; first choice for ailing mzungus at that time. He was, of course English, ever so polite, and sophisticated. We three filed into his car.

As I lay lifeless in the back seat I think I temporarily fell in love with the man. It wasn't just the accent, but his overall charm. He talked with P and made witty remarks, one after another. Word choice and delivery caught me off guard. Perhaps I was edging on delirium, but I found something romantically empowering in his voice. I was quite ill, but not dead.

Once we arrived at the hospital, he instructed the nurses to begin an I.V. drip and nothing by mouth until further notice. I was admitted to a large room with four other beds. The doctor reassured me stating, "This is your private room, so please don't worry." After admission, he made a second visit to the room and comforted me with his bold pronouncement that I did not have malaria. He was convinced of this and knew the Ugandan doctor had been wrong. "No one contracts

malaria whilst taking a preventative medication, notwithstanding the fact that you have been here for only one week's time.”

Convinced, I bought full well into his diagnosis of a nasty sinus infection. Once the X-rays were developed and read, the doc changed his mind, for they showed nothing. Displaying an attitude of little concern, he curtly described the culprit as a virus that would “simply cease to exist.” At the time he was more concerned with my dehydration and insisted that I finish the drip and spend the night. I agreed and Peyton and I slept together in the room, both tormented from the drama of the day.

During that same night my temperature spiked to 104 degrees, yet I was back to normal by morning. That afternoon the doc, Dick Stockley, came for a visit and spent more than an hour with me. He admitted something was wrong, but refused to believe I was all that ill. Although recognizing my elevated temperature, he somehow became suspicious of my intention and advanced an entirely new theory. He was now audaciously suggesting I might be feigning an illness that would allow for an emergency evacuation back to Alaska. He insinuated that I was embarrassed by coming to Africa in the first place and needed a way out, seeking to save face.

To say the least, I was incensed. “How ludicrous!” I barked, proceeding to tell him I wouldn't return to America if I were on fire and it was the hose. “Above all,” I demanded, “how do you explain my temperature?” I suddenly directed my mounting intolerance of everything around me squarely at the doc and made certain he knew that I was in no mood to listen to any more of his outrageous, insulting accusations. At that moment I rapidly fell out of love with him and reconnected with reality.

Later that evening I had another spike in temperature to 105 degrees. I called for the nurse and ordered her to get in touch with the doc right away, which she did. “Draw my blood NOW!” I

insisted. It was only because I refused to back down and demanded an immediate blood test that the truth was revealed. I had read about malaria and knew timing was critical with respect to discovery. Those nasty malaria “bugs” had to be detected precisely when they dumped their toxins into the bloodstream. A poorly timed test would reveal nothing.

An hour had elapsed since drawing my blood when I forced my weak and sweating head high enough to focus upon the slender outline of a man standing at my door. It was the doctor again. I was ready to let him have a piece of my mind, but was much too depleted for such. I believed him to be nothing more than arrogant and I had every intention of telling him so, if only I had the strength.

Just at that time he opened his mouth and said, “I was wrong.”

Energized, I rallied just enough to be heard and said, “What’s wrong with me? Have I been out of my head? I don’t know what’s going on!”

He then continued, saying, “Yes, I was wrong my dear, and you were right. You do have malaria and I suspect it is a rather severe case of the Falciparum strain.” By this time I really didn’t care what strain I had, as long as I could live through it. Displaying a contrite, yet optimistic glance, he said with a grin, “Rest assured, you are going to be alright.”

“What is the Falciparum strain?” P inquired.

“The Falciparum strain is a cerebral malaria and quite deadly. We have caught it in time however, and you will be out of here in a couple days.” Truly humbled, he then asked, “What can I do to make this up to you, my dear?”

“How about taking my poor son for a burger and bringing me a coke?” I returned. He agreed, turned to P and began to inform him where they would be going.

“We will go to a mzungu sports pub and have the biggest American hamburger you have

ever seen. The place is actually owned by an American. They have American milkshakes, as well. Let's go and get your mum's coke." At that they both bid me farewell and I slipped away again into what the doc coined a "pre-coma."

On return Peyton's disposition had transformed from near panic and exhaustion-induced mindlessness to effervescent and buoyant attentiveness. The stories began and seemingly never ended, as I slipped in and out of deep sleep. "I saw lots of white people, Mommy. Almost everyone was white. The doctor paid for everything and we even brought you two cokes." He described every person he met and every word that he heard. The hamburger must have been great because he raved about it and the deliciously greasy French fries for days.

Inexplicably, while Peyton and the doctor recounted the events of the evening, an unforgettable gust of cool, fresh air brushed along the side of my face. There were no open windows in the room and no explanation for the breeze. Maybe it was just hope, but I felt restored. Before leaving, the doc bent forward and hugged me as he handed me an ice cold Coca-Cola. "Please forgive me, my dear. I shall see you in the morning."

I responded by smiling bigger than I had in several days, barely whispering the words, "You're on."

As the doctor promised I was well in three days, which remains a matter of interest in itself. It is difficult to conceive how a disease of such severity could be overcome so quickly after ingesting a single packet of pills. Malaria is still one of the leading killers in Africa, with 350 kids dying every day. The epidemic proportions of infection on the continent, combined with the overall money spent to fight malaria leave the African GDP seriously affected. Discounting or offering these medications for free would strengthen all of Uganda while saving lives.

I will forever be aware of this separation in humanity. After all, had I believed the African

doc in Nakulabye, the entire ordeal would have cost about \$10.00 with no hospital stay. Although I would later reevaluate this dichotomy, at the time I gave it only a modicum of thought. For that moment, it was enough to be getting rid of the parasitic vermin that had taken up residence in my blood.

It's crucial to recognize that from the beginning to the end of this near-death experience Florence, the minister's house girl, was by our side. This, too, is an African tradition. Should one fall ill and need hospitalization, a designated companion attends to all necessities past basic nursing care. Friends or relatives must provide linens, clothes and food. Because of this, the minister ordered Florence to stick close by. In fact, she was a Godsend. We were always thankful for her and made sure she knew it. Aside from Florence, Mrs. Kozi came to see me every day. Many others from the mission and church would occasionally drop by, too.

My dependence upon Florence grew to the point of trusting her with our lives. She loved Peyton and her pertinacious attempts to cheer him always warmed my heart. In the darkest of times, when my temperature would peak, Florence seemingly made the difference between my falling to utter despair and holding steadfast. Whenever I was in spurts of remission, she would take the opportunity to return to the guesthouse for food and to deliver a daily report on my progress. After stopping at church for prayers she would prepare a full day's worth of food for the three of us. She always returned within three or four hours.

Everything about this woman appeared genuine. Often she would take to dancing about the room, singing and praying aloud. Her words were convincing saying, "Peyton, you and your mom were sent to us by God and I won't let either of you go. You both rest now and let me watch over you." This soft and pleasing lady was always reciting personal events. Her stories were real and they afforded us valuable insight to the life of a villager who opted for the city and an independent

lifestyle of her own.

There were times that I would lose myself in her tales, especially when she would encourage me to laugh while she poked fun at herself. In Uganda it is always fashionable to have a laugh at everyone's expense, especially one's own. Her jokes were always funny. If I was coherent, Florence could always elicit a smile and I would praise her highly, always finding her silly quips endearing.

The day of my release was finally upon us. The hospital was requesting one third of my tab upon dismissal and I needed to access the guesthouse for money. The night before I had instructed P to accompany Florence to our room and retrieve \$100. For this reason I was quite surprised when she awakened me early that morning. "Sister Penny, please let me foot it to the room and get your money by myself. Peyton is exhausted and he should sleep." It was true. Once P knew they were releasing me, he wore himself out playing and running around the hospital, talking and interviewing anyone who would give him a moment. I worried that giving her the key and the location of the money could be a big mistake, but as I looked at P sleeping, I didn't have the heart to wake him.

Eventually it was concluded that she had a good point. If Florence took off that early, she could be back by 8:00. This was way too convenient, so I simply caved. The sensation I felt as I held the metal key in the palm of my hand was a memorable one. Although I believed her to be a loving, honorable lady, I had serious misgivings. Still, I pressed on, telling her the exact location of the stashed loot.

Until this day, it baffles me that I could ignore all my conscious perceptions, throw caution to the wind and put our entire livelihood into the hands of a single poor African woman. I guess it must have been post-malarial confusion, because I handed Florence the key...and with it, our lives.

By 10:00 a.m. I should have been walking the floor, but I was still too weak, so Peyton walked it for me. The hours trickled by and with each passing minute I grew more frightened. It

was around noon when the woman finally sauntered through the door. As she walked closer to my bedside, I could see nothing except that same soft, glowing smile. Making effort to steady myself, I took a breath before I calmly inquired about all the time that had passed and then, of course, the money. Without changing her expression one bit, she answered me saying, “Sorry, sorry Madam, I could not find.” I felt like someone had just shot me through the heart! Peyton began asking questions while I gathered my wits. I knew there was no need for further questioning. I had heard “sorry, sorry” before.

I was smoldering as well as terrified and then I heard my son ask, “What does that mean?”

Eventually words formed, and I spoke. “What couldn’t you find, Florence?”

“I could not find the money, Sister Penny.” I said nothing, but rose and slowly crossed to the hall and began to make my way downstairs to the hospital offices gripping the handrails. Once there I informed the clerk of my predicament. Being a Mzungu, I was allowed to leave with few questions and only a request to bring the money as soon as possible.

We quickly gathered and packed our belongings, piled into the special hire provided for us and sped across town to the guesthouse with Florence beside us all the way. As the taxi pulled into the compound, I could not wait for the car to come to a complete rest before opening the door and leaping out onto the driveway. I had already secured the key from Florence, so I was free to hobble down the more-frightening-than-ever aisle of doom, unlatch and throw open the door. In the middle of the floor lay the grey canvas moneybag with the accented black lettering. It was unzipped. Every single dollar and pound sterling was gone. The only thing left in the bag was the Visa card. That was it. The taxi driver was out of luck.

“We’ve been robbed. Shit! Damn it to hell! We’ve been robbed,” I screamed.

Observers would testify that the wailing, the shrieking and the bellowing went for at least

an hour. During my tirade Peyton was yelling, “Call the Marines! Call the Marines!” I suffered an instantaneous tsunami of rage and had nowhere to spew it. In desperation, I ran outside in the courtyard and started shouting for help. Then I told passers-by to quit staring and leave me alone. I was everything and I was nothing. I had no power whatsoever.

Eventually I remembered the phone in reception and dialed the number for the police. As I was describing the crime it suddenly dawned on me that we were alone. No one was anywhere in the whole of the compound. The minister, the wife, and all his men were gone. The kitchen ladies were gone. The assistant ministers were gone. I felt as though I was in an unknown dimension and nothing was real. But then I thought of P, and I managed to get some control.

All the while Florence was sitting close-by, undisturbed with that same infuriating grin and “Sister Penny” sweetness about her. Without warning I turned my fuming face into hers, lowered my eyes and seethed the syllables, “Where is everyone?” She simply shrugged her shoulders and looked away, refusing to talk.

During the confusion Peyton had somehow slipped away and raced to the shack next door to use their phone. Wouldn’t you just know it? He did call the Marines! He had disguised his voice, exaggerated some of the details of the theft, and gave them instructions to motorcade their way to our rescue. The police arrived about the same time as the U. S. military and it became a mess of questions with few answers.

It took more than an hour to sort out the whole story and ensure an accurate recording of all facts. After concluding, the marines returned to their vehicles, leaving only condolences behind. The police instructed me to follow them to what they called “the station” and Florence was taken to jail.

The crying had ended and so had the ranting. Only the two of us remained. Turning my

attention to P, I hoped to be the prevailing tower of strength God intended. I reached for my son, drew him in so close that we became one, and promised it would all work out as if it never happened. “But Mommy,” P whimpered, “there was \$6000 and all those British pounds! How will you make it go away? No one can do that.” I agreed, and then rationalized that we would have spent it anyway.

Next, I became as serious as the situation, stopped, lowered my head and looked directly into his eyes. Knowing what he was thinking, I headed him off before he could ask, declaring, “There’s no way we’re going back home. We will recover the money and stay here as planned.”

An argument ensued, which lasted for some time. Mostly P was scared and couldn’t imagine not hopping on the next flight out. He blustered for an eternity about how alone we were. “How will we eat? How will we live?” We didn’t have a shilling on us and had nothing but a credit card to our name. He pointed out that the only food in the kitchen was rice with black weevils, and he made the excellent point that Florence would never be punished and would merely use our \$6000 + to buy her way out of prison.

Oddly, Peyton immediately suspected the minister as the mastermind. He insisted they were all in on the robbery and had left Florence to take the fall. At first I thought it was all a bunch of T.V.-style drama yet I, too, wondered about the strange mass disappearance in light of the event. Mostly I just knew the money was gone, probably forever. My depleted body was barely hanging on and I prayed for strength. We were rocked hard and had only each other.

I looked deep into P’s frightened blue eyes once again and pledged to make it work if he would just give me a chance. We held each other for many minutes, praying and sobbing. I was first to pull us apart, smiling and asking, “P, what do you do when someone steals every single penny you have in the world?” He only frowned and looked away. I continued with my official podium-trained voice, “You thank God for the Visa card, find a fancy hotel, sit down and stuff

yourself with tons of Western food. Look out Sheraton, here we come!”

We did just that. Somehow I found the strength to walk back to the hotel in city center that evening. There sitting at the table after dinner the two of us began to develop a noticeable case of “the sillies.” It was obvious that we had entered into the world of seriocomic relief out of desperation and our overdrive had been tapped. Needless to say, our perceptions of Africans and every tiny African custom were now subject to rethinking.

There and then, both Peyton and I “mashed up” our keen sense of humor with our intellect and observational skills. We even coined our own mantra, “We will be African,” and kept it handy as a reminder of a new no-trust policy. After all, if Florence could bamboozle us, anyone could. This was a kick in the gut, for we knew full well we really were alone and could confide in absolutely no one. A clever combination of skepticism and slapstick was definitely indicated.

For a short time we made fun of everything that moved. Lots of our folly was somewhat wicked. It remained exclusively between us and was our own special brand of private revenge. Indeed, when Peyton told me his favorite jokes I doubled over with laughter that turned to tears. Most all Ugandans seem to have bad breath of the same origin, but I’m not sure what origin that is. When we would get a strong whiff, I would announce that the “Langoliers” were near. Peyton would giggle heartily over that. We made up songs; we made poems; we invented our own little language, in fact. This passive-aggressive act of retaliation served us well. I believe it helped keep us going.

That night we made a committed effort, as we zeroed in on exactly what it would take to be African, with meaningful examples gradually shared. We were assured that if we thought like an African we would begin to see through them as well as they could see through us. Anyway, besides our intensive beliefs designed to keep us safe, we still had the Visa card. But, most of all and more

importantly, we had our faith. We schemed to uncover various ways of comforting ourselves. Peyton found hope when I promised that we would spend one night a month in a four-star hotel and make use of all available amenities, including the pool.

Consequently, the Equatorial Hotel became our home away from home just as I had planned. The staff knew of our theft, for news travels fast in such places. Out of sympathy they showered us with concern for our well-being and even discounted rooms and meals. Accordingly, attendants at the pool adored Peyton and offered him free swimming lessons whenever we were guests. This was effective and a great comfort. We basked in the support of the institution while licking our wounds.

Prior to instigating a ritual of hotel-hopping, I was forced to deal with the nasty business of the robbery and the police the next day. Also, the American Embassy had requested I recite the event in detail to them after speaking with the local authorities. Normally the Embassy didn't involve itself with private affairs such as ours, but for some reason they had taken a keen interest in us.

The following day the Embassy sent two officials to the guesthouse to take my statement. The local police sergeant was in the room at the time and demanded that he, too, advance a litany of inquiries that was nothing more than a regurgitation of what the Embassy asked. Peyton and I cooperated and spoke with the three men for hours. The reverend's disappearance continued to mystify them, just as it had us. Where had he gone and why hadn't he returned?

They wrote down everything we said, just like on T.V. They asked us questions individually and collectively. The report was pages long. After the American official in charge was satisfied, he informed us that we needed to appear at the Embassy within the week and cooperate with the local police in the meantime.

Upon their departure, the police sergeant insisted that we accompany him to the station.

“Station?” I scoffed. “Hut would be more like it.” We complied with his wishes, however, filing into his car and riding down the street to the domed room made of mud where we he officially swore us in. Unfortunately, the police had never taken fingerprints at the scene; stating that everyone had touched our door before we arrived and that it would have been pointless. Pointless right, but not for the reasons they gave! As feared, we discovered early on that the whole enforcement system was implicated in one way or another and everybody wanted a piece of the pie.

While at the “station,” the sergeant took note of a wee, black kitten pacing back and forth around his feet. He asked if we liked cats, to which I replied that I liked every living thing except Ugandans. “I have great dislike, teetering on hatred, for all Ugandans,” I announced. “I particularly despise soft-speaking people with perpetual grins on their faces like Florence. Perhaps my present emotions are tainted, but for now they are what they are.”

The police captain countered my scorn with some philosophical advice saying, “Look, I can’t blame you for your feelings, Madam, but time will soften your pain. Meanwhile, do you like cats?”

“I like kittens, but that isn’t relevant just now,” I said with final disgust.

“Well, do you want this cat? He’s wild, so be careful,” the policeman cautioned.

“For sure!” Peyton said forcefully, and then grabbed the little feller up into his arms.

As we stood to walk away, I looked back and said, “Great. A \$6000 cat. How comforting!”

The sergeant ignored that and simply reiterated, “He’s wild you know, so be careful. I doubt you will ever get him home.” He had a point—we had a quarter of a mile’s walk down busy Hoima Road and I, too, believed that “fight or flight” would kick in.

But this kitty was different; seemingly brave and bright. I took hold of the cat to assist Peyton and turned to walk away. As I clutched our furry prize to my chest and headed out, the

sergeant called out that I had no worries about Florence because she would be in jail for a long, long time.

“What about a trial?” I yelled back. The extremely short, dull-looking, middle-aged man followed us outside, explaining every step of the way that the courts would let us know. He continued, saying that it would most likely be a month or two before it came up on the docket, but that we should remain hopeful.

The kitty was commanding all our attention by then so I didn’t pay much mind to the sergeant’s closing words as we walked straight into the ruckus of the traffic. We seemingly had a great pet, Florence was in jail and surely the minister and the rest of the gang would be back before too long. In the meantime, we would find a store that would take a Visa card and somehow muddle through.

And by the way, much to our surprise this two-month-old skinny, dusty, intuitive, black fur ball never made any efforts to scratch or jump from my arms all the way home. Funny how these babies always seem to come along when they’re most needed. What’s up with that?

Chapter 4 – Sorry, Sorry...

Four days after the theft, the minister, wife and entourage of followers turned up at the guesthouse. They were keen to recite a dreadful tale of tragedy that had apparently shaken them to their sandals. The reverend was seriously bereaved due to a personal loss, and recounted every detail of their ordeal saying, “My twin brother took his own life five days Saturday. It is unlawful to do this and he could not go for proper burial. We are just returning.”

“Well, I hate to add to your troubles, but we suffered a robbery and have been in pretty bad shape since last Saturday ourselves. Oh, and your house girl is in jail,” I firmly stated.

“What are you saying? Talk slower, I cannot understand!” he insisted.

“All our money was stolen from our room. I gave Florence the key...like an idiot.”

“Oh my dear! Sorry, sorry. We thought you were in hospital.”

At that I gritted my teeth. For a fact, he knew of my release date. “Sorry, sorry! What do you mean? As we told you, I was to be released Saturday. And I was!”

At this point the man seemed to crater. He held his face in his hands and moaned a syllable or two. Then it dawned on me--the Mrs. was trying to comfort me all the while. She kept fawning over me and stroking my head. Reverend Kozi appeared truly shattered. I backed down and held my tongue.

Ironically, my departure date from the hospital was the exact day of the brother’s death. Odd that. Anyway, we apparently missed them by minutes. Mrs. Reverend was a visual mess and insisted on hearing our story again and again. While assuring me, “I would not have left if it were not for the brother’s death, my sister. Sorry, sorry for leaving you alone.”

“Sorry, sorry. I am sick of hearing that,” I blathered. Fortunately, few heard those words that were carefully issued under breath. Next, I gave details of Florence’s incarceration and everyone appeared to be taken off guard. After that, folks were simultaneously consoling and badgering us with an incessant barrage of inquiries. I rose to the occasion and took charge, requesting that everyone settle down and recognize that we had survived and would be okay. Continuing, I assured them that I would be conducting a personal investigation into the matter and hopefully unveil evidence that would help us recover the money.

It was late November of this same year before the trial was to take place. Surprisingly, we made the newspapers and not surprisingly, we were the star attraction of the local gossip. We were

poised and ready when the date rolled around. Strange as it was, we were told the trial was to take three days.

Day one the minister was sworn in. To my astonishment, the man was unapologetically a witness for the defense! When confronted he had little to say about the whole affair, except that it was his duty as an employer to help in any way he could. “Help who? Your sense of allegiance leaves me speechless,” I growled with obvious anger. He maintained a mute response to my probing and anything else I offered thereafter. Rationalizing all these things gave me great pause and naturally I was left suspicious.

The second day brought major concerns as well. Florence was supposed to give testimony, but for some reason she was excused. Two guards had taken her from where she sat, and she did not return. She appeared ill, and was literally hanging onto the arms that assisted her. At that juncture I turned to P and whispered, “This is getting weirder and more confusing by the second. I feel as though WE are on trial.”

“Where did they take Florence?” was Peyton’s only response.

“I have no idea, but I believe she is ill. I’m worried P, this doesn’t look good.”

The voice came from the judge saying, “Well, due to illness, court is adjourned until tomorrow.” Then the man walked out. Next, the court attendant announced it was time to clear the courtroom.

The following day we were permitted to take the stand. I assumed it would be a “slam-dunk” case of justice, so I didn’t give my testimony much forethought. When called I was sworn in, took the stand, and then recited my account of all the doings. It was pretty straight ahead and I recall little interrogation from the defense attorney. This court appointed lawyer went directly to the point asking, “What happened the morning of your hospital stay end?”

“I sent Florence to the guesthouse to gather \$100 so I could pay my hospital bill.” From there I recounted the story without so much as a pause. All was good. Then it was P’s turn, and as with me, the words he chose rolled off his tongue with relaxed ease. Parenthetically, when the judge asked him if he swore, Peyton replied, “Swearing is wrong, your honor.” The courtroom, along with the listening, adjoining halls of accountability, was literally shut down with roaring laughter. Within seconds the pounding of the judge’s gavel brought the folly to an abrupt halt and a thick silence overtook us all.

After what seemed to be weeks, the courthouse segment of our drama drew to a close. Spirits were high as we anticipated a positive outcome that would surely help to liberate us from a portion of our pain. HOWEVER: It came to be that at the end of those three days, before a room peopled to standing room only, the verdict concerning the complainants versus Florence The House Girl was handed down. She was found NOT guilty. Even worse, the judge informed the room that it was most likely Peyton who had somehow stolen the money.

“This 12-year-old child is the perpetrator. He disappeared from the hospital while his mother was sleeping, returned to the guesthouse and stole the money,” the judge declared.

Just as those words passed the judge’s lips, my scorn--just short of rage--created quite the disturbance. “Now that’s enough!” I yelled and then literally sprang to my feet, inadvertently slamming my chair into the railing behind me saying, “What the hell are you saying? How dare you accuse my son?”

Instantaneously two armed guards rushed to my sides, ready to apprehend me by hand or by gun. “Sit down madam! You are in contempt.”

Purposely and disrespectfully, I countered with a halting gesture to each soldier saying, “Relax guys! Stand down and I will do the same!” They said nothing and stepped away.

After taking my seat I continued with a heated, deprecating spew delivered loud enough for all to hear. “What is wrong with you? Are you seriously ill?” I concluded with a diatribe of nasty proportions, rich with conviction, and without a trace of trepidation. “I promise to discourage all Westerners from ever stepping foot onto Uganda’s low-life soil. I vow that someday all guilty parties will answer for their transgressions!” Of course, my oratory was ignored, for in the middle of all these threats and predictions the judge sauntered out of the courtroom with a barely audible chuckle escaping from under his breath. It was over and, in the end, I was left the crying victim with no hope of recourse.

At that moment there was nothing left to do but spend energy in a frantic manner, for all the words were of no account. I was in for a full-out run. Unconcerned with Peyton for the moment, I dashed out of the building at full speed and never stopped until I had tackled almost a mile of continuous up-hill terrain. Perceiving my intentions, Peyton guessed where I was headed, and took his time getting there.

After several minutes he was by my side saying, “It’s over and time to give it up.”

“I know that,” I barked. Then I slumped deep into the standard white, dirt-stained, plastic lawn chair that sat just outside our favorite neighborhood shack. Together we pouted, despite the relentless cajoling from the shack keeper. He kept teasing and inquiring if something was chasing us. We were in the throes of unabashed sulking, binging on self-pity as the injury seeped into our every thought.

Eventually Peyton talked me into returning to the guesthouse. “Let’s go home and see what people are saying. Will Florence be there?”

“She better not be. I’ll slap the stupid woman if I get the chance,” I retorted.

By the time we made our way back to the guesthouse the news had spread and the condolences were overwhelming. Even the congregation from the church, who had occupied a large percentage of the court chamber, expressed sentiments of sympathy and disbelief. Along with the reverend, the entire staff offered their comfort at every turn and for days after. The minister's wife finally gave in and insisted on a measure of help. She advanced me the equivalent of twenty-five dollars. After a few days their kindness and lamentations began to take root, diminishing my scorn and rapidly shrinking my rage.

Immediate need forced me to depend solely on intuition. As I told my son, "We are not African and cannot accurately interpret their behavior or intent. I just wonder what is buried beneath that veneer of loving concern."

I'm telling you that Africans seem predisposed to remarkable and accurate powers of perception, revealed only through personal gain. Truly, Africans can read an animal, including humans, in an instant and 'feel' their way into knowing. Super-size this substantial gift with guilt and the end product is laced with a believable performance of good behavior.

"Peyton, something is so wrong with this whole situation and I'm determined to get to the truth. Why was Florence released? What is up and who all is involved?"

"I don't know Mommy, but Reverend Kozi is acting really weird. Do you think he is mad at us?"

"I don't have a clue, P, but if it's the last thing I do, I'll get to the bottom of this."

My plan was to begin an all-encompassing investigation, find the culprits and have them brought to justice, of course. I believed my investigations would pay off in time and we would ferret out the ringleader and accomplices through their telltale ingratiating behavior.

Additionally, P was afire with the excitement of espionage and secret escapades while believing all this to be his duty. He solemnly promised never to let his personal radar lapse into complacency. We would remain a formidable dual force, determined to expose all the offenders and their partners in crime...if any existed.

Less than two weeks after the devastating verdict we were practically back in the saddle again. Well, at least I was in the driver's seat of a well-worn "Pajero," (Mitsubishi Montero; African style), purchased with various contributions sent from America. Through prayer, trust and determination I was able to head off heaps of resentment and find the way to a bit of emotional recovery.

Acquiring a car--any car--meant taking steps in the right direction. But this was Africa, and purchasing a vehicle turned out to be a bit stickier than originally thought. The very day the "lemon" became mine was the very day it broke down. This nasty, run-down, antique of a SUV died as we were motoring back to the guesthouse. We ended up at the side of the road, searching for a telephone.

At the time I wasn't too distraught, for I had bought the beast from the Baptist Convention Missionary Service in Kampala. I took comfort in knowing that this honorable institution would stand behind their machine and compensate for any foreseeable problems. After all, this time we were dealing with white-skinned Christians--most of them from America.

We received a real kick in the pants when the folks at the Baptist Mission refused to take any responsibility for the dead vehicle. They offered absolutely no assistance, and simply ignored my complaints, stating that they had a no-return policy. Just as we seemed to be losing the battle, a Ugandan gentleman by the name of Moffat came to our aid. He was head mechanic for the Baptists,

attending to all their autos and trucks. By chance, he overheard our conversation while visiting the office for business reasons.

This kind and giving individual remains our friend--more like family--to this day. He deemed the car unworthy from the beginning and voted for us to have our money returned. It was hard for the Baptists to refuse, especially when I added, "My father lives near your Dallas headquarters and he will be happy to drop in there and rectify the situation." Begrudgingly the man in charge returned our money and canceled the sale. We were pleased and gained a wee bit of strength in our victory.

Within the same few days, the occasionally compassionate reverend mentioned a minister friend who owned an extra car. "It may be for sale," he said. "It's a 1987 Honda hatchback sent over from America some years ago. I'll call and see what he says."

The car was a golden color with few dents, and had more than 200,000 miles on the engine. Because it was American, the steering was on the left. This would prove to be a challenge because we were residing in a Commonwealth country with the driver's side on the right. Nonetheless, I didn't have much of a choice and I agreed to see it.

The Honda had but two owners and apparently had been well cared for. This was a good sign. Supposedly, after being shipped to Uganda it had never left the country. The price was right and before we knew it we purchased the little car we christened "Toro."

Even still, the minister's colleague was a curious one who I didn't trust. Maybe I was already becoming African, for today that same handsome, diminutive Ugandan preacher man has become a central figure advocating punishment for homosexual behavior in Uganda. Remembering well: He was mainly interested in cultivating white friends and a Western lifestyle; took a white woman for a wife, and constantly schmoozed with mzungus.

Securing transportation meant the world to us. The freedom it brought was priceless and we were blessed with independence. We were finally able to separate from the others and reach remote areas to ask questions about Florence. We had heard that she frequented the guesthouse when we weren't around. Why was she there and why were people tolerant of her crime? On many occasions we both felt as if some members of the "family" were snickering behind our backs, and gossiping about the crime.

"Why are we never allowed to visit the minister's house?" I asked Peyton.

"I don't know, but now we can go any time we want," P added.

"I have an overriding sense of being outside the fold," I confessed. "It's time to step up to the plate--or doorstep--in this case," I concluded.

Within a week or so we initiated a visit to the reverend's home. After parking the car down the road, we made our way to the front porch without being noticed. I was certain my heart was beating loud enough to be heard. Approaching the step we both looked hard into each other's eyes. I asked, "Are you ready?"

"I'm so ready I'm like an international spy at this point," P said with a huge, gaping grin.

"Okay then." I knocked. When the door swung open the minister stood with an open mouth, eyes as big as walnuts. He was thoroughly taken aback.

"What are you doing here, Sister Penny?" he inquired nervously. My response was candid and I simply said we were driving about and happened upon his address. "How did you know my address?"

"The church secretary gave it to me. Can we come in?"

"Of course, but please, I ask you to wait while we prepare the room," he countered.

The delayed entry proved to be completely atypical, for it was unusual for anyone to wait outside while a room was supposedly prepared. More important, after stepping inside, we both were quick to perceive a remnant of discomfort between the two of them, as the wife rushed to us with hugs and kisses. Her embarrassment was apparent and it was saturated with amends and excuses for the delay.

In addition to their remarkable skills of perception, Ugandans could possibly offer a degree in apologizing. They are born apologizers and care much more about etiquette and opening their homes for the white man than most anything else. One could say that the white man is loved and feared in equal measures. I actually felt some fear that afternoon, but I blamed it on my own imagination. Besides, Mrs. Kozi treated us with great respect and before we left, the usual cakes and soft drinks were served. All seemed to be in order.

A day or two later my curiosity got the better of me. What did I perceive and why had I experienced palatable fear once in the minister's home? I was forced to return to the scene. This time I suggested P stay in the car. He was fine with waiting while I supposedly dropped off "something of importance" for the minister's wife. Undetected, I was able to sneak around to the back for a wee peak through a window. Peering in, I caught sight of a large computer tower, monitor, keyboard and something resembling a large printer.

In the far corner sat a television of grand size. I recall wishing I had a camera in hand. Hearing the reverend wail about his financial state, one would have considered him practically destitute. The question was immediate: How in the world could he have acquired such high dollar stuff, and why had he arranged to keep everything concealed? Did others know of these electronics? Perhaps my caper had paid off after all.

After that it became nearly impossible to keep all of the findings to myself. It was a test of will to suppress my imagination and stay calm. My hand often made its way to my mouth as I physically stymied my exuberance before spilling it all to Peyton. As it happened, keeping those facts under wraps was the right choice. When I did confide in Peyton, he was consumed with endless speculations and scenarios to the point of exhaustion. In comparison, I was well under control by then and was successful in reeling in his enthusiasm, vowing to get to the heart of the matter, no matter what.

It was P's idea to drive the 35 kilometers up country to Mwera town for a secret investigation of the school where I still wasn't teaching...and the house in which we still weren't living. After all, just one year earlier the preacher had touted that the new bungalow would be ready for our arrival. Curiously, this structure consisted of only four completed brick walls, with construction obviously at a standstill. There was no roof, no windows and no doors. I had asked the reverend repeatedly when the house would be finished, to which he would always smile and reply, "Soon, Sister Penny, soon."

By now we had been in Kampala more than three months and not a single thing had been done to ready the house. Seemingly, we had been forced to live at the guesthouse where all kinds of church members could keep an eye on us, or so I believed. More to the point, what happened to the money I had sent from home to build the house?

Even worse, nothing concerning my position at the school was ever mentioned. It was as if all of this had been misrepresented and the overall purpose of my appointment had disappeared with it. We both felt a faint, yet pervasive sensation that people were beginning to secretly take sides. But more to the point, we questioned if there were any "sides" to be taken. Why were we left in limbo and what had gone wrong? Were my misgivings based on fact or was I wrong about

everything? To counteract my obsessing and confusion I felt compelled to step back and question whether or not I was becoming paranoid.

With that in mind, I needed a break to free myself from such overwhelming currents of emotion. I was also growing weary of relying on money from home and needed income beyond my stipend from the mission. Grappling with the situation, which included keeping my unrelenting angst in check, I decided to audition at one of Kampala's several radio stations. My first choice, Capital FM, was sister station to London's radio legend by the same name. It remains a fast paced, top-40 enterprise until this day.

The day finally came when my confidence was at its peak, so I loaded up Peyton and went for the audition. Upon meeting the program director, I inquired if they needed an American voice for recording on-air adverts. In return, the director asked if I could be funny. "You're kidding, right?" I scoffed. "If I were to tell you what happened to me during my first 10 days here, you would question how I could *not* sport a smile."

"For sure, I want to hear your story. Every mzungu has one," he returned

"Well, I came close to dying with malaria and all my thousands of dollars were stolen from my room while I was in the hospital."

"Why did you have all that money in your room in the first place?"

"I'd tell you, but it would be bloody embarrassing if I begin to cry."

"Oh, come on, give me a clue," he insisted.

As I began to tell my story, he gave way to hearty laughter. He went on to say nobody trusted ministers in Africa. "But, it was his house girl that did it. He had nothing to do with it." I insisted.

"Well, keep me informed. I'd love to hear how this plays out," he said.

At that, we both began to relax and the conversation turned to radio and my history. I told him I was a Screen Actors Guild actress and had many hours dedicated to radio. His test was to make jokes and watch my reaction. Before I knew it, we were doubled over almost in tears. No doubt the rash of horrendous events since our arrival had pushed me close to the edge. Surprisingly, our hilarity became infectious and before I knew it, those around us were giggling, too

Wrapping it up he said, “Well, Ms. Mzungu, things certainly been difficult since your arrival!”

“You think?” Then I laughed even harder. In typical radio fashion we both began making more jokes, shedding our sophistication and surrendering ourselves to the moment. Almost an hour and a half later I veritably raced out of the studio after accepting a position as the newest member of the Morning Crew. Peyton was ecstatic! We splurged and celebrated my new appointment with dinner at the posh Japanese restaurant in upscale city centre.

The rest of the night was devoted to creating a character that would blend with the other members of the Morning Show. I was to be called “Nakamatte,” the large and lovable woman who was married to the jolly and robust Fenekanse. This man’s name actually was Fenekanse and he was a known personality in the city. In addition to his job at the radio, this kindly comic was also the cartoonist for the government-owned newspaper. Everyone enjoyed this fun-loving individual, as he was helpful with newcomers and was always ready to inform and educate at a moment’s notice.

It was also his job to make sure that I didn’t say anything that would overtly insult the government. Oh sure, guarded humor supported by respect was tolerated, but Fenekanse kept a check on us both. The two of us were charged with livening up the airwaves during the early

morning traffic hours. Often we gently teased several members of the ruling political party and encouraged a relaxing ambiance as motorists made their way to work.

I always adored performing on radio, but I never experienced such a merry encounter as working with that crew. Capital FM was pure African and the program was designed to set minds at ease. At times the show would lean toward silly and gamey, which was ever so inviting to me. Happily, we were free to poke fun at stories that made it to the paper, and more times than not the army and the police as well.

From those days until this very moment I have maintained a steady appetite for all African affairs. I still appreciate Capital FM for helping to develop such intense interests. However, at times we were somewhat inappropriate with use of stirring news items for comedy's sake. In particular, references to the war in the north were constant and never once did I perceive the situation realistically. Eventually I began to take the war seriously and in return I dealt with the facts and stats, tackling the heavy-handedness of reality. Once I made the transition to truth, I was unable to access the situation for a laugh. It was no laughing matter. When I began to appreciate the plight of the victims, comedy at their expense ended...at least for Nakamatte.

Though I remained happy in my performance, it wasn't all smiles and sunshine during my tenure at the station. The parent corporation had dragged their feet legalizing my hire and was remiss in submitting appropriate documentation. Meanwhile, someone was busy tipping off immigration about my yet-to-be-secured work permit. When immigration agents confronted me at the guesthouse and gave me a browbeating regarding the whole affair, the radio quickly tied up all loose ends and I was pronounced legal.

On the other hand, who had told immigration about my work permit and why had they done such? What was going on and was I about to uncover the threatening truth? Again, I had nowhere to turn but to God and my resilient self.

Chapter 5 – Yamba (Help)!

Once immigration found me and threatened to deport me, I asked the minister how they could have discovered my whereabouts. He assured me that he had no idea. No way did I believe him, for he was the only one that would care enough to do such a thing. He was tired of my pressing him about the unfinished house and especially tired of my asking about the money sent from Alaska to build it. After this turn of events it became exceedingly evident that I needed to keep a closer eye on the “man of God.”

In due time clues began to present themselves without solicitation, just as I had anticipated. I followed my impulse to oversee all endeavors at the guesthouse, keeping a piercing and watchful eye on everyone as I began to suspect the very worst. I rekindled past emotions of suspicion and fear and once again recalled the events of that wretched Saturday when Peyton and I found ourselves all alone without a shilling. Too, why did Florence visit the mission and why did people take her in? What was really going on and who got the money? These issues were biting at me and I felt the answers were nearing.

With the evidence mounting, it became even more critical to “become African” and *think* African. It was imperative that we stayed tuned in and made the effort to read minds and hide our emotions just like they did. It was a tough assignment, but I knew it was the only way we could get to the truth and secure our survival. Just as we were attempting to ascertain more and more information, I was about to discover exactly how deadly serious our situation had become.

Out of the blue I received a phone call summoning us to the United States Embassy. When the call was received I was informed that it was personal and had nothing to do with the radio job. The caller was emphatic, however, and demanded that I attend to the matter as soon as possible. Still on edge and scared of most things around me, I deduced that we were about to be deported.

We hurried down to the embassy that very day. With such a disturbing and threatening invitation looming overhead, the journey there seemingly took forever. In route, I barked at P, demanding that he keep up. On arrival, we practically ran inside the building.

After reception greeted us, we took a seat in the waiting room. No more than two or three minutes passed before the lady who had telephoned us appeared. She was stately, of moderate build, but mighty just the same. Her brown hair was short and looked as though it was a true wash-and-wear. She walked directly to us straight away, held out her hand and introduced herself. She cast an omniscient eye from behind her wire-framed glasses and it scared me half to death. All I could think of was jail and if I had overstayed my visa.

“Please, follow me,” she ordered. We walked down a narrow, empty hallway without wall hangings and stopped abruptly at a door as she directed, “Have a seat.” After taking our chairs, Peyton and I sat quietly as she began to position herself. Surprisingly, she smiled and then pulled her chair out from behind her desk and joined us, making efforts to draw near. It was obvious we were in for something big and she wasted no time getting to it. Before she said another word, she reached across me to Peyton and patted him on his leg. “What I am about to tell you is shocking and I am sorry. Please trust the Embassy and you and your mother will be fine.”

“Uh, OK. I will,” agreed Peyton. I could hear him breathing heavily. I said nothing.

“The man who is housing you has placed a contract on your life, Ms. Randell and the Embassy is here only to report this to you. Should you decide to remain in Africa, you are placing your lives in danger.” She never took her eyes off mine as she grew silent and drew an audible breath.

Stunned, I was barely capable of speech. Eventually I whispered, “Do you mean Reverend Kozi? He is my employer at the mission.”

“Yes, him. You suffered a significant theft, right?”

“Right, but his house girl did it. I mean she was in jail for a short time.”

“But after the trial she was freed.”

“Right.”

Calmly and deliberately this somewhat non-emotional woman reached back across her desk, securing a manila folder outlined in red. It was the Embassy’s permanent and official file on the minister. She held it with one hand, while patting it with another. “You see, Ms. Randell, we have been watching this man for embezzlement of money from foreign missions for several years now. He has grown quite wealthy and has no intention of stopping his illegal exploits just because of you.”

“But what did I do to warrant a threat on my life?” I begged.

“Didn’t you go snooping around his house and haven’t you been up in Mwera asking questions about the house that isn’t finished and about why you aren’t teaching there yet?”

“Well, yes...but...”

“Well, yes...but, THAT is what is going to get you killed. At this point it is a rumor, but if you continue to push this man, he will have you killed.” From there she apologized to P again and then continued to painstakingly describe the recent murder that had taken place in city center.

It happened about one month prior and was still all over the news. A white woman had her tongue cut out while sleeping in a hotel located near the Sheraton Hotel. She had information concerning a sketchy Christian organization’s high-level theft and intended to bring it to the attention of the police. She was anonymously warned, yet she didn’t take the threat to heart.

“What do we do?” I sobbed.

This time she patted **my** leg while making effort to assure me I would be okay **if** I turned in my notice at the station, giving a phony reason why I had to return home as soon as possible. “You must convince them immediately that you have given up. You **MUST** do this today.”

My tears were short-lived, for I was ever so aware of P and worried about what he thought. I shook my head ‘yes’ the whole while she was talking. When I could I offered, “I’ll do as you say and will convince the minister of all these things. I promise.” The pronounced pain in my stomach worsened by the second. I remember breathing through my mouth and the taste of the thick, clammy December air drying out my tongue.

She sat motionless before us, matter-of-factly stating, “I hope so, because the Embassy prefers not to transport bodies back to the States, and that would no doubt be the end result of any further investigations on your part.”

I held up both hands and lowered my head to slow her narration enough for me to keep calm. She proceeded with purpose and continued dramatically describing the nasty business we had stumbled into. I took a moment and surveyed P’s condition. I swear, P’s eyes were stuck in constant flutter as he ingested the sensational and terrifying warning.

All my fears and perceptions, first felt in Scotland, proved to be spot-on. This corrupt and heinous man was known for extortion and moral turpitude that had infected the Ugandan religious realm. Still, somehow he had many missionaries who thought highly of him while he had reached deep into the pockets of abiding churches in America, as well as other countries. Our government had red-flagged this one as a con-man who was to be watched closely, along with members of his nefarious staff. How could I have fallen for such?

Seconds passed before anyone dared speak. After a healthy handshake she adjourned the meeting. I reiterated my commitment once more as we took leave of her office. We smiled at the lady behind the bulletproof glass in reception and were out the door and into the street.

Upon reaching the car, I sank behind the wheel. Peyton was given to an onslaught of dialogue that I worked ardently to ignore. Of course, he espoused his convictions and then yelled, “We MUST go home! I told you!” He looked to me for comfort, but I didn’t have an answer. I knew these things and yet, all I could do was sink into the upholstery. In doing so, I shut my eyes. I couldn’t feel anything but fear. I couldn’t say a word.

We sat in silence for what seemed to be hours. Finally I pulled away from our parking space, and I began to maneuver aimlessly down the roadway, not knowing where to go. When I got my bearings, I was looking squarely into the Mosa Court Apartments and Hotel compound, on Nile Avenue in Kampala’s upscale district. I’m talking armed guards, a big iron gate and obvious safety. Other than the Sheraton, this complex offered some of the most prestigious living quarters available in Kampala at the time. Peyton naturally pressed me for a reason to sit just outside the gate, staring at it as though I knew what I was doing. “What are you doing now? What’s this?”

“It’s an apartment/hotel sorta place, Sweetie. They have a big gate, barbed wire, glass spikes above on the brick wall and **guns**. It’s also very colonial and somehow represents Uganda’s government, I think. Important people live here.”

“But we could never afford this. We live in Nakulabye, and this is Nakasero! That’s like night and day. What are you thinking?”

“Be still Peyton,” I scolded, “I don’t know what I’m doing and can’t make sense of this whole ordeal. Just give me a moment to think. Please!” I knew P’s assessment was right, but what were we to do? I anticipated tears and knew full well that he regarded the entire situation as our

green light to return home. But if we did leave we would always be loath to the idea of returning to Africa, let alone ever living there again. Still, something was astir and I was caught up in the inner voice that was pressing me onward. I could not allow us to be victims of fear, nor could I ignore the threats. I needed help--help outside my own capacity. I needed God.

As we pulled cautiously up into the hotel compound, an armed, uniformed security officer approached our car to find out what we wanted. He was ever so polite and I simply informed him that we were curious about the hotel. He allowed us to pass, tipping his hat as we entered. Once we stowed our car, we headed into the reception and asked if the proprietor was about. The staff, too, was polite asking, “What is the reason for your visit, madam?”

“Actually, it’s a very long story that I prefer to tell just once; hopefully only to the owner, if possible.”

“There will be a long wait, I’m afraid. He is attending to official business.” She then came from behind the counter and escorted us to a separate building next door and told us to make ourselves comfortable.

We waited pretty close to four hours before anyone came near us again. Eventually the lady that had been sitting behind the typewriter stood and walked toward us. She was surprisingly tall for a Ugandan and spoke in hushed tones. As she stood towering over us, a huge smile crept across her face and she spoke. “Mr. Kigongo will see you now.” With that, we stood and walked through the door that she held open for us. The office was huge and the desk was the biggest I had ever seen.

“Please come,” came a deep and distinguished voice from within. “Please take a seat. What can I do for you?”

“Thank you, Sir.” Both P and I did as we were told and sat in the two wooden chairs facing his desk. He introduced himself and then motioned that it was my turn. “My name is Penny Randell,

and this is my son Peyton.” From there I proceeded to tell the man an abbreviated rendition of our story. While doing so, I distinctly remember his intense black eyes gazing into mine and the degree to which he appeared to be listening. He showed no emotion whatsoever, yet I sensed a comfort of sorts extended our way. At times while I was involved in the story, this large and imposing figure of an African man would stare into P’s face. Seconds after, he would return to study me. I found the man to be quite disarming and I became atypically relaxed while reciting my captivating tale.

Surprisingly, our new acquaintance was well aware of the minister and enthusiastically informed us that unscrupulous “men of God” were common in Africa. He then chuckled, suggesting we should not be so shocked. On the other hand, he took the threats on my life to heart and indicated there was definite cause for alarm.

With that, the man stood and said, “Follow me.” Here again we did as we were told and followed him back to reception. “Is B1 available at this time?” he inquired, while all three of us stood at attention in front of the desk. This soft-spoken, ever-so-short lady, who barely cleared the counter, checked her books and then turned to Mr. Kigongo.

“Yes, sir it is,” was her reply

“Good. Keep it so.” Then he turned toward the door, saying, “Come back to my office.” We followed him and again took our seats in front of that same enormous, black, wooden desk that reminded me of a miniature plateau. Then he announced, “This is where you are going to live. But first you must resolve all that business at the guesthouse. This preacher cannot know where you are going to stay.”

On reflection, I remember thinking this must be some sort of a farce. I did not instantly believe in the apparent kindness before me and was even alarmed to hear such an offer. Who could

think otherwise? Then I heard him asking Peyton, “Do you enjoy using a gym?” He continued telling Peyton that the hotel had an outstanding facility with a swimming pool and more.

Gradually I began to visualize what I was hearing. We were going to live there and we were going to stay in Africa! Prayers were answered; how could this be? Why had I gone there in the first place? And most of all, who was this man, Moses Kigongo, anyway? Suddenly I knew the offer was real. Then I blurted “But what about the tariff? I’m not so sure we can afford this.”

“We will get to that, madam. Don’t you worry,” he reassured me. I merely smiled in amazement.

Direct and laconic, the man made his thoughts known more through gesture than words. He obviously had liked Peyton from the start and that was a compliment. During the course of our conversation I informed him of my position at the radio and identified myself as Nakamate. He expressed great interest in my job and said that he was a fan of my radio character, and had a fondness for my style. He lauded my talents and thanked me for helping Kampala become so “cosmopolitan.” He asked about details of our daily presentation, from the sound effects we employed to the creation of our outrageous sketches. He was impressed that Fenekanse and I were co-writers and mentioned that he appreciated Fenekanse newspaper cartoons.

For reasons unknown, I felt obligated to mention the occasional off-color remarks we made on air. Our scripts poked fun at everything from the American President Clinton’s scandal to the war in the North. I admitted we were often disrespectful, but listeners considered it amusing.

Quick to put me at ease, our newly found friend told me to relax and that no disrespect had been taken. Turns out our prospective landlord particularly enjoyed the fact that we spoke of the war in jest. He said, “You have a reassuring effect on the population. People need to see the war through different eyes.” I didn’t agree, for the war had spanned almost two decades and hundreds

of thousands had lost their lives with millions displaced because of it. In the end I deduced that if humor could help foster hope maybe it was all okay after all.

We concluded our meeting by agreeing that Peyton and I would make our physical move to the apartment after we handled our business. Most importantly, and beyond anything believable, we were informed that our rent would be only a bit more than half the customary rate. With nothing left to discuss, we shared the moment with a hearty handshake. Peyton and I were literally floating back to our car. The whole scenario was surreal, and for a moment I wondered if I had dreamed the whole thing.

Unfortunately I never made an attempt to ask any questions about Mr. Kigongo. One thing was for sure: it was more than apparent that this striking character was someone of great importance. Perhaps I was afraid to ask. Because of the political condition of the State, I somehow concluded I should remain ignorant. Anyway, I didn't really care at the moment. We were staying; we were going to live in an upscale part of Kampala; and most of all, we had found safety.

Turning to Peyton I whispered, "God doth provide. We are supposed to stay and we have found our way. God doth provide."