

THE BALLAD



OF BLACK BOSCO

by Ernest Bazanye

Winner of the National Most Misleading Book Title Award.

Chapter I

I WAS standing in the middle of Kampala Road without trousers on.

Don't be alarmed. I was wearing shorts. Khaki ones, with dozens of pockets on them. Casual menswear of this kind was fashionable at the time: clothing which came with a pocket per inch of cloth.

The situation was created by the new charwoman, Caldonia, an absolutely crazy chick with marbles every place but where they should be. The Worm and I had had her for three weeks now. She would come in on Saturday, dust, sweep, mop and wash what we told her to dust, sweep, mop and wash, then she would flit off into the sunset with her money and a smile.

I don't know what got into her this week, however. This week, while The Worm slept and I watched TV, Caldonia hurricaned her way through the residence, cleaning and mopping with lethal vigour. I should have sensed something was wrong when she lifted the carpet and began to scrub underneath it, but Adam Sandler was saying something really cool on M-Net.

At some point, about the time Winona Ryder was confessing to Sandler that she really didn't mean to hurt him, and that if he gave her another chance she would blah blah yadda yadda— Come on, I don't watch romantic comedies for the romance. Quit yapping and do something funny!— at around that point, Caldonia announced that we did not have enough detergent.

"Worm! Nti we need more Omo!" I yelled across the house, passing on the responsibility.

Something that sounded like "Tell her we'll get some tomorrow" issued from a half-asleep mouth hidden under a pillow in his bedroom. I translated and Caldonia left. I assumed she was resigned to doing the laundry the next day.

No. She found a way to do the laundry, even with insufficient Omo. The Worm woke up a half hour

after Sandler and Ryder had gone off to live happily ever after. I was still stuck on the couch wondering if anything in the world was worth getting up for. The cushions and the laziness were winning the debate.

The Worm was walking in and out of rooms, entering them with anxiety on his face, emerging even more agitated.

Finally, when he could no longer cling to the hope that he had been mistaken, he announced his findings. With his hands in the air and a tone approaching a screech, he said, "She's washed everything! Everything! I swear, she took everything that had anything to do with fabric and washed it! Everything!"

"Um... wow," was my weak response. I had not yet understood how this came to be a problem.

"What am I going to wear!?" Remember that screech that was approaching Worm's voice? It had arrived.

"I've got places to go, people to see, things to do!" The Worm continued to moan. At the walls and the windows because he rightly assumed I wouldn't care.

"You know how you're always accusing me of being lazy?" I reminded him.

"Yes. The reason for that statement being obvious— You haven't moved from that couch all morning, have you?"

I left out the part about the pot that woke up at eleven a.m. calling the kettle on the sofa black and said, "Actually I did. Caldonia wanted to mop under the sofa, but that lies beside the point. What I wanted to say is, this predicament, does it not convince you that there is something to be said for laziness after all? That there is a positive side?"

"You speak of a positive side. I see none. Illustrate," Worm said, hand on chin.

"Well, if Caldonia had been a lazy person, like say, Crooked Paul, you would not be in this zib. You would have lots and lots of unwashed clothes to pick from. He always left plenty of work undone."

Crooked Paul was the dude we had cleaning before Caldonia. We had to let him go. The Worm loved it. "I tell you Mordecai, we are finally men, real men. Bona fide employers who not only have the powers to fire the subordinates, but who, at last, can boast of having actually deployed these powers."

He had wanted to fire Crooked Paul for a long time. Mostly because he was a very lousy worker.

Paul (we didn't know he was crooked then) told us he was in senior three, though we were convinced he was at the very least twenty years old. He did not discuss his age, but didn't dispute the charge, when leveled against him, that he was a little bit old for O'level class. He explained, in a tiny, plaintive voice, that he had only himself in this world and that is why he went around the neighbourhood on weekends cleaning houses. It was so that he could pay his way through school and get an education.

I was convinced. He needed to make money housekeeping, we had housekeeping that needed doing. I didn't see any problem, only a solution. But The Worm was not too keen at first. "Shouldn't a cleaning lady be, I don't know, a lady? Shouldn't a charwoman be, perhaps, a woman?"

"It's the new millenium, Worm. Gender equality. Anything a woman can do, so can a man."

Paul was finally contracted. The Worm's consent was secured when he discovered that rather than call Paul a charwoman or a maid, he could call him a valet, and life improved considerably when you could speak of having your own valet.

We soon found out why Paul was such a bargain. He was always late and sometimes didn't show up at all. His mopping and sweeping left the impression that if you had just blown at the dust then spat on the floor you would have achieved better results. He favoured the dip-once-squeeze-twice-rinse-now-that's-it technique when it came to laundry and often returned our clothes with the stains still intact. And his ironing was pathetic. He could actually make the clothes look more crinkled than before he began. The Worm grumbled bitterly about having to re-iron his clothes after having paid a valet. I remember the argument.

"The guy needs the money!"

"He is ripping us off!"

"He needs to pay his school fees! Look, do it as a kindness; send out some good karma. Let it be said of The Worm that he was a sarcastic, self-centred and vain bastard but his life wasn't entirely useless, for he once did a good deed. He ironed his own pants so that Paul could have an education."

"Mordecai, have you ever seen Paul's handwriting? He left a note the other day and I tell you it was not inspiring. The man is barely literate. I was forced to conclude that whatever education they are

giving him, its quality can only be adequately described by a person who has had his head immersed in a sewage pit. I mean to say, of course, that it is shit. So we are paying for shit service, so Paul can pay for shit education!"

Eventually we agreed to put Paul on probation. And he did show improvement, knowing that he was in danger. We shouldn't have. Are you familiar with the phrase "term agenda"?

Knowing that they will be out of the teachers' and prefects' jurisdiction in a few short days, naughty schoolboys go on rampage at the close of the term, vandalising, stealing, bullying etc. Sure that they are going to lose upcoming elections, bad governments loot and pilfer as much as they can before they get booted out of office. And Paul, knowing how his probation would end, also began to do his own term agenda.

There is a hardcover Wole Soyinka book that The Worm likes to bring out and place on the bookshelf to impress select visitors. One day it fell out of Paul's shirt as he was leaving. Suddenly we came to understand why so many books and CDs and magazines had been turning up missing over the past couple of weeks.

Paul said he was only borrowing it, and we said, of course you were, goodbye and have a good life. We didn't pursue the matter beyond firing him. Me, because of my sympathetic soul, Worm, because he was just stymied by the twisted nature of the crime. "The guy can barely read and he decides to steal a book a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature! Words, fittingly, fail me."

So I was on Kampala Road in my shorts, trying to pretend I didn't know how misguided I looked. Inside, all was turmoil. It is at times like this that the most irrational fears rear heads. I used to be a secondary school teacher. A few years ago. The kids I taught should be in university now. What if one or more of them is frolicking about town right now and sees me? You know how university students are: they are very fashion-conscious. Their whole life is a catwalk. And you know how former students are: they are very vengeful. If my former students saw me looking stupid on the streets, they would, in all probability, stop their car, run out, point at me and laugh out loud.

I quelled those fears though, with simple logic. Come on. Like any of those dimwits would make it

to university.

That's when a voice right behind me said, "Eschoose me, sir."

I responded as anyone would under such circumstances. By saying "Oh shit".

I turned round, fully expecting to see one of the ex-students draped head to toe in something classy like Dolce or Gabana. Maybe even both. I was trying out approaches for dealing with this. Part of my mind was weighing "Listen, I can explain" against "What are you doing gallivanting around town? Don't you have anything constructive to do?"

Fortunately, I did not need to employ either manoeuvre. It was not a former student. It was a tiny boy in oversized sunglasses jerking his thumb in the direction of a Corsa parked a few feet away. "Eschoose me sir. Dat man he want to talk to you."

In the car was the fellow I had come to town to meet. Isaac.

Isaac is our rich friend who we like very much because he buys all sorts of alcohol for us on weekends. He has other appealing qualities, such as one usually finds in friends, but I thought I should point out the most important of them. Lots of money.

He gave the little boy a thousand bob note for delivering the message and me, and the boy scurried off to wherever he came from.

"Street kids are dressing stylishly these days," I said to Isaac, as the boy and his sunglasses disappeared.

He reached over and opened the passenger door, saying, when he saw my shorts, "You should borrow a leaf from them."

I got in the car and he asked where The Worm was.

"The full story is, he is stuck at home because all his clothes, except the *pajama* he spent the night in, are on the wire, having been washed this morning by the cleaning lady."

"Why would she wash all his clothes and leave him nothing to wear?" Isaac asked.

"That is a question we plan to raise with her on our next meeting."

"This is no good." Isaac shook his head in disappointment. "This completely throws plans out of

equilibrium. The Worm's presence is vital for this programme to succeed. We must fetch him."

"Will your programme succeed if The Worm is present in his *pajama*?"

"I will lend him some clothes of mine. Let's go get him." And off we drove. Isaac thinking deeply about his plan, me thinking deeper: what plan was this that would have one party in shorts, the other in borrowed clothes and only one of us looking decent?

Chapter II

The Worm had mixed feelings about Isaac's offer. The first feeling in the concoction was outrage: he was not in senior four and therefore did not see why he should be expected to wear borrowed clothes. He expressed this feeling with sardonic curtness. "Are we going to Namagunga for social?"

The second feeling was hurt pride, because Isaac's fashion sense and The Worm's principles found themselves at odds in some places. "I don't wear no fucking Sean John!"

The third feeling was more to our liking, though less to our understanding. The Worm worked as a producer at a radio station and had been called in to present a weekend radio show for a DJ who wasn't feeling well. They had called him with this assignment while I was in town, and he was less perturbed by the call to work on a weekend than he was by the prospect of having to show up in boxer shorts. Isaac's offer seemed to show a way out. We gave him that special glance people give to radio presenters who worry about how they are going to look on air, and he deftly ignored it. Instead he agreed to go off to Isaac's and get some clothes.

After we were fully clad (or at least some of us were. I was still in my shorts) and were heading for the setting of Isaac's programme, he began to unfold its details.

"You two guys are Congolese," he announced.

I had an objection to having my Ugandan citizenship so abruptly abrogated, and requested an explanation as to why.

"And you don't know very much English, so don't use words like 'abrogate'," Isaac replied.

I insisted on the questioning tack. "Why am I Congolese?"

"I need two Congolese guys," Isaac said.

"Why didn't you just go to the Congo to fetch them?" was The Worm's query.

Isaac looked exasperated. "I don't mean like real Congolese guys, like Kabila and Wamba dia

Wamba. I just need two guys to pretend to be from the Congo. So you guys just have to act like you are from the Congo. “

“I don't know if I can do that. I haven't spent a lot of time in the Congo,” I was unsure.

“Do they have deep voices like this: (Worm lowered his voice to a frog-like bass) 'Je suis le Congolese.'? Or do they have high voices like (and he switched to a high pitch) ' Alors! Vive la revolucione!'"

“Exactly the question,” I pushed. “I mean, take Lingala star Kofi Olumide for instance. His voice, though gay, is quite deep. On the other hand, Arulus Mabele has a grotesquely squeaky voice. Which is which?”

Worm jumped on that point with deep concern. “I think it's more like Mabele's. First of all, most Lingala songs are sung in that squeaky register, and secondly, I don't trust Kofi Olumide. Kofi Olumide sounds like a West African name.”

“They make Lingala in West Africa?” I asked.

“He may be just pretending to be Congolese, too.”

Isaac crashed in on our discussion. “Look, you don't have to talk, deep or squeaky. All you have to do is stand there, not speak English, and most importantly, not dispute the fact when I say you are two associates of mine from the Congo.”

“Okay,” I found it reassuring that the brief wasn't going to be as demanding as I had previously supposed. “So we just stand there and nod. Any particular posture?”

“Where is Kofi Olumide from then, and why is he trying to deceive us that he is from the Congo when he's not?” Worm was quite indignant.

“He is from Mali. Now let us focus,” Isaac, getting more and more impatient, said. “Now, Beatrice says I have been avoiding her...”

“The way women immediately jump to that conclusion just because don't want to hang out with them,” I mused.

“Mysteries of nature,” he replied. Anyway, I had to make up a story explaining why I was always busy and why my excuses never made sense. So I came up with something brilliant. I said, 'Okay, all the

other excuses I gave you were lies. I had to withhold the truth for your own protection. The truth is, I have been assisting the CIA.' Very clever, eh?"

The Worm and I decided to start practicing our Congolese act. We just nodded and said nothing.

"I mean I could have said I was helping the army, or the ESO or ISO, but I didn't want to get into trouble. The idea of standing before a judge being asked why I have been impersonating security officers and having no answer to give except that I didn't want Beatrice to get mad, well the CIA is much safer."

We nodded in our best Congolese fashion.

"Now, I have to look after two Congolese double agents, that is you guys, for a while. But she insists on meeting you. So that is where we are going."

"You mean we are not going to be video-dancing style Congolese, we are going to be raggedy-assed Banyamulenge bush-rebel Congolese? That sucks."

"No, no. you are like Congolese James Bonds. That's much better."

"Voici! Alor! Ecoute! Je parlez vous!" Worm began to practice again.

"Another thing, Beatrice speaks French. So you double agents don't know any French."

"So we don't speak French, and we don't speak English. I presume we don't speak Spanish, Greek or Dinka either. What language do we actually speak?"

"Lingala, of course. All you have to do is string together random syllables while making sure that the letter 'L' is heard very often and you are speaking Lingala. It's the easiest language in the world," he beamed. "Try it. Elesengolidodelelegasela ndele!"

"Helegnolendeddlie ngebalodalele lende!" I said.

"Um.... Golele hadandelengasole bodelegatele hallebere!" said The Worm.

"Perfect. Our first conversation in Lingala!" Isaac was very pleased.

Though I wasn't personally acquainted with Beatrice, I couldn't say I didn't know her. It is the nature of men such as Isaac, when drinking, to lapse into long monologues about how horrible their women are. Sometimes it is not as bad as it seems, but Isaac's rants were so impassioned, so, dare I say, desperate

that I was compelled to believe that she was in fact the most evil bitch in Uganda. I felt I needed to warn The Worm, because I thought it would be helpful to have him clued up and on my side should things get ugly. I did not want him walking into this unprepared.

“Worm, there is something I must tell you before we meet this Beatrice,” I said. “She is a monstrous harpy. And I don't mean any disrespect, Isaac, but the danger you are about to put us in is of such magnitude that we cannot afford to mince words.”

Isaac brindled slightly. “You have just called my woman a monster.”

“I am quoting you, Isaac. That is the word... one of the words you used last Tuesday when we were at Club Zero.”

“You are right,” Isaac conceded. “Worm, be advised. Beatrice is a mean-spirited and cruel cow and you should not enter her company without knowing this beforehand.”

The rest of the trip was taken in detailed narrations of the various and frequent manifestations of her evil nature and we almost turned around two times because Isaac's courage was flagging. But when we finally arrived at the rendezvous spot, we at last got to see why it was that he did not flee, but soldiered on.

How can I put this? Plainly is the best way to go in these circumstances, so plainly shall I go. Beatrice has the finest tits you will ever see. Perfect breasts. The perfectestest breasteses you will ever see. Not only are they shaped and aligned in impeccable form and harmony, their relationship with the rest of her body is the paragon of proportionality. All too often you will find that good tits are hampered by an overambitious behind or, perhaps, an unmotivated one, but with Beatrice, her ass knew its place and, whereas it did not slouch in its own office, being very firm and shapely, it did not compete for attention with those titties. No, it complemented them, accepting that it shall be consigned to second place when descriptions of her magnificent figure came into conversation. So, we had a nice ass, a pretty face, a very well-disciplined waist all working in concert to ensure that those splendid knockers knocked the wind out of whoever came to see them.

And when it came to seeing them! Beatrice was wearing a light clingy bloussette with a plunging neckline, so the first thing I said when I saw her bounce up to greet Isaac as we entered the bar was,

emphatically, “Ngolebengelessembali ngo!”

The Worm agreed wholeheartedly. “Singaligelelebetengalibo!”

Sculptors and architects would kill to be able to achieve such flawless work, I thought as the wondrous orbs floated towards us, and I understood what Isaac had said earlier: “It’s hard to put up with the rest of her, unless you realise that she can’t talk forever. Eventually she will remove the blouse and access to the breasts will be achieved, making all worthwhile.”

“Sweetheart!” cooed Isaac, giving Beatrice a long tight hug.

“Hengelegbe ntiso,” Worm said to me, which I translate as, “I have never felt this jealous of another man.”

“Betengelesesne,” I replied, nodding my head in empathy.

“What took you so long?” said some part of her that was not mammary. After tearing eyes away from her chest I was able to ascertain that it was her mouth.

“I had to pick these two double agents I told you about from the American embassy,” Isaac replied. “May I introduce you to Modecele Yayi...”

Isaac waved a hand in my direction. It occurred to me then that Congolese people probably do not shake hands. More likely they greet in a more African fashion. So I surged forward and gave Beatrice a warm and luxurious hug.

“And Wamudi Wamu,” Isaac said, with stern undertones, which Worm ignored and leant in for his turn.

“This one is very dark. I thought Congolese were more light skinned,” Beatrice said, after prising The Worm off her person and straightening her clothes.

“Heh heh,” Isaac laughed nervously. “Um... you shouldn’t believe everything you see in those Lingala videos. Most of those singers bleach their skin. A lot of Congolese, in fact, most of them are dark as charcoal. Like agent Modde here.”

“But the other one, he is light.”

Isaac parried this objection away. “He was in a band in his youth, before the war, during Mobutu's

days.”

“Really? What band was that?” Beatrice asked the question to The Worm. The menace and irritation that had filled her eyes since the overzealous hug was waning. “I am quite a fan of Lingala music. Maybe you were in a band I know of.”

“They don't speak English,” Isaac quickly stepped in, lest The Worm forget himself and launch into an elaborate story about being the star guitarist for Awilo Longomba.

“Oh, said Beatrice. Well, quelle...”

“No French either,” Isaac said abruptly.

Beatrice frosted over again. “Well, translate the question then. Duh. Ask him in Lingala or whatever...”

Isaac sighed. “Wamudi, bentelenge lenge bengele?” Isaac asked.

The Worm looked him in the eye like a carpenter looking at a sheet of iron and said, “Eh?”

“Bentelenge bengele? You know, bengele bentengele?” Isaac repeated.

Worm shook his head and shrugged. “Me no unna-stende.”

Isaac rolled his eyes. It was finally dawning on him that The Worm was not the best person to call on if you want a venture like this to go off without a hitch. “Bentengele! Bentelenge lenge bengele!” he mimed playing the guitar and glared angrily at The Worm.

I joined in, to explain things to Wamudi Wamu. “Solingo tongolgo sibantale nchoblalontogo silanta bisoosoolo ntibalogo elefenetesoliongo. Ntobilosobelesi. Nto.”

“Ooooh!” Wamudi finally got it. “Mbengele! Mbengele, no bengele, Mbengele! Oh!” the light of realisation illuminated his face. “Mbengele!” he was so happy to finally get it that he had to give a round of hugs. A brief one for Isaac, a brief one for me, and a special long one for Beatrice. “Mbengele! Oooh. Isoontiloo so mbengele.”

“Yeah yeah. Bengele, mbengele. Same difference. Do you guys want to make yourselves busy for a while and let me talk to my woman?” Isaac snarled.

“Nkisiongolo?” I asked, because I, of course, did not understand the language he spoke.

“Bantasi. Bantasi um... eliseweyangole,” he repeated, irritably. With gestures.

“Oh. Elesewa. Nitobewanoya. Ookay. Okay. Ehh... “ I decided to try out the little English I had picked up since leaving the Congo. “Gete eh loste, eh?”

“Yes. Precisely.”

“Oooh. “

“Wait a minute, he hasn't said which band he played...” Beatrice began to say before her breath was cut off by the farewell embrace The Worm caught her in. I was closing in to say my own goodbyes when Isaac gave me a glare cold enough to freeze a hug into a handshake.

“The man is a slave to those boobies. Those splendid boobies.”

“Yeah. He has to do whatever they say. It's a shame.”

“Still. Better that than freedom, I am tempted to suppose,” Worm said, pausing to point Isaac out to our waiter. “He is taking care of the bill.” Back to the matter at hand. “Isaac's problem is simple: it is separation anxiety. Fear of the unknown. He is afraid of letting go of her because, though he knows staying with her is agony, he fears that if he leaves her, he will regret it.”

The Worm was on his soapbox and once he's up there, he will not disembark until he is good and ready, so I let him go on. It provided something to do while waiting for the beers to arrive.

“The thing he doesn't realise is that you never do regret it. In my experience, that fear is always unfounded. There is always a new woman once you get bored with the current one who, by definition, will be fresh and invigorating. One should go ahead and dump. It is good for one. Until the new woman becomes current, then she too has to go.”

“You are such a misogynist, Worm.”

“Yes, but I get laid a lot more than you do.” He had a point.

“That makes you a true scientific wonder. An asshole like you gets so many women, but a sensitive, caring gentleman like myself has to turn the volume on the radio up loud so that I don't hear what is going on in the other room.”

“If you think about it, yes, it is not fair. But it works, so I don't question it.” The drinks finally arrived.

As we took our first swigs, I ventured, “It follows, however, that you have a lot more exes. Which makes the threat of a sticky situation erupting where you least expect it all the more real.”

“I always expect it...” Worm was saying when a shrill and voice shrieked from the crowd behind us.

“Worm? Worm, is that you?”

I knew that voice. I had to turn the radio up really really loud for that woman I recall. I remember I had to switch from the BBC to Capital FM to drown her out, and ended up having to listen to Celine Dion for an hour. “You were expecting someone?” I said.

“Worm, oh my gosh! What a surprise! Where have you been? I mean, oh my gosh, like this is such a surprise. I like totally didn't think... like wow!” and Genevieve hove into view, wide-eyed and bucktoothed and shrieky-voiced as ever.

She invited herself to our table and gushed a bit more, completely failing to notice the look of pained discomfort on The Worm's face, then she finally asked the question. “Like, why didn't you call me? You just disappeared, you just like totally stopped calling me. What happened?”

The Worm likes to assume that his women will put two and two together on their own, and that it is unnecessary to spell things out. So he never actually tells them, he just lets them come to the realisation, on their own, that he is a lying scumbag who has used them. In a nutshell, he has never actively dumped anyone. He just stops calling.

He had just been going on and on about Isaac being afraid, I didn't think he would exhibit such cowardice now, but then again, why not? So instead of telling Genevieve the truth, he just mumbled, “I was going to call you... um... um.... Dear, but you see my wallet got stolen and your number was written in it.”

“Oh, really? That like sooooo sucks. And I was like, oh my gosh. Maybe he just like doesn't want to be with me anymore or stuff like that. Ooooh! Well, look, here is my number, let me give it to you.”

Believe it or not, the woman wrote her number down on a serviette and slipped it into The

Worm's pocket. "Don't lose it this time, okay? Now, I have to go back to my friend, but call me!" and she skittered off, with her shrieking voice and all its exclamation marks.

I was speechless already, but when Worm, after checking to see that she was out of sight, picked the napkin out of his pocket, rolled it up and tossed it away, I was even more than that, whatever being more than speechless is. He looked at the expression of absolute flabbergastation on my face and seemed shocked, even offended.

"What?" he said.

Thanks to beer and Saturday afternoon and the ambience of the bar, the conversation drifted to less demanding topics. We had been speaking for a while on trivial matters like the merits of the unitary republic over the federal state as applied to Uganda, when Shrieker returned. "Oh shit," I said, hearing her shrill voice behind my back again.

"Yoo hoo! Worm, I want you to meet my friend and her boyfriend. You guys you like totally have to meet The Worm. He is the guy I was telling you about."

I saw Worm, light skinned enough at the best of times, turn pale as a sheet. I turned round to see his look of shock repeated. In Isaac's face, as Genevieve, pulling Beatrice by the arm, Beatrice pulling Isaac, said, "This is The Worm and his friend Mordecai. You guys, this is my friend Beatrice, and her boyfriend Isaac..."

"Sendelengobo," said Worm to me.

I replied immediately. "Olendese bentebo."

And as per that discussion, we bolted the hell out of the bar, pausing only when we heard the shout, "Wait for me!" to look back and see Isaac running behind us.

Chapter III

The Worm works as a producer at a radio station as I already mentioned. This was my first visit there. When The Worm, Isaac and I walked into Force FM. The first thing Worm did was whisper to the receptionist smoking at the entrance: "Is the boss around?"

She blew a puff of smoke into his face and then asked, "What do you think?"

The Worm guessed not. Only in his presence is Force FM studios a non-smoking zone.

"Good," The Worm said. Then he turned to us. "It's okay. You can come in."

Having ascertained that there was no one to catch him smuggling contraband in the form of non-staff into the studios, he cursorily introduced us to the receptionist. "Cecilia, this is Mordecai, my housemate, old friend and biggest fan," he pointed at me. "And this is Isaac. He has a car."

As we walked past. Cecilia rolled her eyes, skillfully saying, in response, that she couldn't care less if we were envoys from the Planet Neptune.

Isaac *could* care less. "He has a car? He has a car? Is that the best you can do? You guys ruined my evening and shattered my plans for the night. I thought you were feeling remorseful and that you brought me along to make up in this little pathetic way for that, and now you tell me that you only brought me along because I could provide transport? I am very wounded."

"I am very wounded, too," I added. "What do you mean, I am your biggest fan?"

"Okay, I'm sorry, I lied," The Worm said. I took it that he was referring to the slander he made about me, and Isaac duly took it that he was referring to what he had said about him being our chauffer, and we let it drop.

"In the fast-paced, cutthroat media business, it is important to develop certain instincts, certain skills that will enable you to survive. Make no mistake, son, you are swimming with sharks here. You must be alert, savvy, on point and cunning every minute of every working day," lectured Worm as he led us into

the carpeted interior of Force FM.

“I have never understood what a producer does, but from that programme on TV I gathered that what the job entails is twiddling knobs, pushing buttons and, when necessary, putting a finger on your mouth to shush people who try to talk in the studio,” I said. “None of this, it seems to me, requires cunning, savvy, or whatever else you listed.”

“The cunning, savvy etc is not absolutely necessary for doing the job. The producer’s role can be adequately performed when the actor is hung over or half asleep or heavily constipated. In fact, in my case, it often has. The cunning and savvy and what have you are essential, however, in keeping the job. As you know, the studio called and asked me to fill in for Stephen Bass, who is not available to do his show tonight...”

“Yes, I am aware of that much.”

“Well, do you know what happens to people who fill in for others?”

I shrugged. I didn't know exactly.

“What happens is that they impress the bosses and they get promoted. We don't want that. Absolutely not.”

Vicissitudes were floating around in random orbits, but I could not trace any actual patterns. I still wasn't fully up to speed. “Promotions are good, right? Are they not?”

“Maybe in that crazy collar-and-necktie world of yours they are, but here in the media, promotion means one of two things. One: When we over-play a song by a crap singer, like Sentamu Wycliffe Sentamu, we are promoting him. Two: When they decide that I should be on air deejaying instead of behind the board sleeping, the promotion means more work for no more money. I have problems with both kinds of promotion.”

“I hate that fucking Sentamu Wycliffe Sentamu song,” sneered Isaac. If you want to draw someone into a conversation, bad music is bait that never fails.

“So what we are going to do today is make sure no one ever calls me to fill in for anyone else ever again. Are you with me?”

“Who allowed that guy to record that song in the first place? I mean, really, didn't they know what they were subjecting us to? Don't people have a sense of what's right and what's wrong anymore?” Isaac ranted.

The Worm lead us into the studio, which was a small dark room with a machine that had a row of knobs on it that slid up and down as if they could not decide where to be. There was a computer screen too, a few microphones and headphones. There were speakers around playing easy-listening pap from the eighties. I was more interested in the carpeting on the walls.

“Why this?” I asked Worm, feeling it.

“I am not at liberty to say,” he replied.

“You are not going to play that ghastly Sentamu song, by the way, are you?” Isaac wanted assurance.

“Not on my watch,” Worm assured him. We sat down and The Worm buzzed around doing technical stuff for a couple of minutes then gestured that we put the headphones on.

As the Alexander O'Neal song trailed off, Worm pushed a button and suddenly his voice was in my headphones.

“107.6, Force FM. The time now is seven o'clock, and it's the Sunset Cruise. Your regular host Stephen Bass is not going to be with us tonight, but don't worry, I will be here to fill in. Let's get things rolling with this jam from Uganda's very own Sentamu Wycliffe Sentamu...” and the sounds of Onkyamula began to bounce out of the speakers. I could hear them painfully close in the headphones.

Along with the sharp, even more pained, exclamation: “Fuck! FUCK! You promised you wouldn't play that shit! Fuck, man!”

“But Isaac, Sentamu Wycliffe Sentamu is one of Uganda's leading crooners, one of the nation's most talented troubadours, and this song is loved by thousands of Force FM listeners,” Worm said.

“Then thousands of Force FM listeners need to explain where they get all that cocaine, because no one with his or her senses around him or her would fail to notice upon hearing the first notes of this song that what is taking place is sucking of the highest order!” Isaac retorted.

“Are you saying that this song sucks?”

“I am saying that when it goes to song hangouts, the mediocre songs won't talk to it, the dreadful songs think it's a waiter, and the absolutely awful songs point fingers at it and laugh saying, 'What a loser'. This song reaches the deepest depths of sucking, grabs a shovel and begins to dig lower.”

“Well, Isaac,” The Worm continued to speak in that slow radio voice, “let me get this right, I get the impression that you don't like this song, Onkyamula, by Uganda's Own Sentamu Wycliffe Sentamu...”

“You get the impression? Talk about the pot calling itself a shade of beige. I don't like the song? I loathe the song. I find the song repugnant, revolting and repulsive. If you asked me what I would prefer for Christmas: a live performance of Onkyamula from Sentamu Wycliffe Sentamu himself, or hemorrhoids, it would be no contest.”

“Strong words there, from Isaac...” Worm was saying.

Isaac, who still hadn't realised that he was live on air, continued. “Furthermore, you know what? I believe that guy did it on purpose. I don't believe it was an accident. Do you really really think a person can be that horrible a musician? No way. It must be deliberate. Sentamu Wycliffe... I'm tired of saying his full name. Fucking Wycliffe Sentamu must be an evil person who did this purposely to torture us. He trained in a secret villain singers training school to learn to make his voice sound like goat, and he unleashed it on us, knowing that you pansy radio stations will play it over and over because you would think its unpatriotic to toss it aside. You would rather play shit than admit that a local boy sucks ass!”

At this point the song died down. And The Worm deep-toned, “That was local Uganda artiste Sentamu Wycliffe Sentamu with his smash hit Onkyamula,” Worm said. Then a pause. Then, “featuring commentary by my in-studio guest Isaac Mugisha who has joined us tonight. If you would like to call in the numbers are 031847586,7 and 8. Force FM is the station you're listening to. Don't touch that dial.”

Isaac was gaped speechless at Worm, who casually took his headphones off as a commercial began to play. I took mine off too, and nodded, “That was good.”

“Thank you. It's going to get better. Let them start calling in. I hope to call Sentamu himself in the next segment if enough people call in to argue with Isaac.”

"You mean I've been broadcast?" Isaac gasped.

"Dude, you are in a radio station studio. What do you think we do in here if not broadcast?"

"So... Like all the stuff I said was on air? And people heard me?" he whispered.

"Live and direct," sniggered Worm. "We'll be back on in seven seconds."

After a couple of minutes of toothpaste and toilet paper commercials, we were back on air. The Worm announced it. "Welcome back to Force FM. It's ... okay, I've already forgotten the name of the show... it's a generic music show with a deejay and commercials, and I am sitting in for Steven Bass who is ... well, I cannot say in case his wife is listening in. Anyway, in the studio with me I have music critic Isaac Mugisha, who just gave us a spirited denouncement of Sentamu Wycliffe Sentamu's latest hit. We were wondering what you out there think. Let's take your calls. Mordecai, press that button."

I pressed the button, and a harsh voice crackled into the headphones. "Hello? Force FM, I want to comment on what that gentleman with the filthy language has said about that song by Sentamu Wycliffe."

"If you are waiting for a starter's pistol..." said Worm.

"Okay, I just want to say that I agree very much with what the potty-mouth has said. Sentamu's song sucks, and he has no talent."

"Thank you caller, thank you very much," Isaac chipped in.

The caller wasn't through. "Not only that, but he also lacks gratitude and respect. Imagine, those who took him in and believed in him when no one else would, when he was just a struggling nobody, he just tosses them aside like an old rag at the first whiff of success..."

"Excuse me," I thought it was time to join the discussion. "Would we by any chance be speaking to one Olaf Nakanywagi?"

"Well, maybe... that may be my name..."

"Proprietor of Olaf Studios? The place where Sentamu recorded his first album, which flopped, before he left, found another producer and recorded this song?"

"Our history with Sentamu is not the point, the point is that the son of a bi..."

“Worm, which button do I press?”

“The blinking one.”

And Olaf was cut off. Now we had Benson on the line.

“I disagree with your critic, Steven.”

Worm cut in. “Um, I am not Steven, Benson, and I will thank you to remember that. I will overlook that insult and let you continue, however. You were saying...”

“My apologies, whoever you are. I was saying, via the phone for which I am paying, that I disagree with the critic. Come on, you have to admit that that is a catchy song. I liked it the first time it came out. In fact, I often found myself whistling the tune in absent moments.”

“Of which I am sure you have had plenty, but don't let me interrupt,” Worm cut in again.

“I was saying, the song itself is not the problem. The problem is that you radio stations decided to play it like seven times an hour all day long. No wonder people get sick of songs in this city. You guys just overdo it. You know too much of a good thing? Ever heard of that saying?”

“Well, Benson,” Worm said, “I am tempted to say no, and to encourage you to elaborate at length on a saying that is old, well worn and commonplace, just so that your phone bill may hit the ceiling, but unfortunately, you have a point, and my sense of fair play has gotten the better of me. I will do you a favour and cut you off so that we can talk about you without you incurring further cost.”

Worm clicked the phone off and turned to Isaac and I. “What do you think of what Benson has just said, studio guests? He sounds like an idiot, but he does have a point.”

“Well, Ugandan radio stations do play songs to death, I will agree with him there,” I said.

“That they do,” said Isaac. “But I am not with him on the part where he says it was a good song to begin with. This song has never been good in its life. It was born sucking and has never been weaned.”

“Is he an idiot, though?” Worm pushed.

“He most certainly is,” Isaac concurred. “As the in-studio critic, that is my opinion on Benson.”

“Let's see who else we have on the line,” Worm said and pushed a button. “Hello caller, you are live on Force FM. Your name and your comment.”

"My name is Fred."

"Yes Fuledi."

"Me I am not amused. You people should know that there are young people listening to this station. How can you allow such foul language to be broadcast on the airwaves when kids are listening?"

"Good question," Worm said, enjoying himself as he clicked Fred off. "Next caller."

The next caller was the one we had all been waiting for. "Hello, I would like to say that that song which you have been abusing so unfairly is actually my favourite song in the whole world. Not only that, it is the favourite song of many many friends of mine. My enemies love it as well. Who, in their right mind, can fail to appreciate the beauty of its intricate melodic texture, the grace of its tonal balance, the inventiveness on the part of the composer in interweaving modern and traditional influences to create a wholly new and interesting sound? Who can?"

"Caller," said Worm, "we cannot go on referring to you merely as 'Caller' or merely as 'The dude who is reciting the words off the press release that accompanied the sample CDs that were sent out to the media' so could you please give us your name?"

There was a fumbling pause, then the caller coughed and hemmed. "Umm... my name is ... um... Senteza."

"Full name?"

"Senteza ... um... Senteza Weee... Wilfred... Senteza Wilfred. I am a big fan of this musician and I think he is great, one of the greatest in Uganda."

Isaac took this one. "Now, listen Wycliffe, what do you mean 'intricate melodic texture'? Not only is the beat as basic as a pestle pounding peanuts, it is also the same beat that has been used by a dozen other singers. Everyone who comes out of that studio comes out with some slight variation of the same crappy beat. And as for the songwriting, lyrics which translate to 'Let's dance, let us all dance, those in the left, dance, those on the right, dance,' lyrics like this do not win Nobel prizes for poetry. And finally, 'New and interesting sound'? To that I can only say one thing. New and interesting my ass. However, I do like those scantily clad women you bring on stage with you during your shows."

“Viewers, I am sure you are enjoying this as much as I am,” said The Worm, before giggling. “Hee hee. Mbu 'viewers'. I have always wanted to say that on radio. Anyway, we can take one more call before we exceed the time limit allowed between songs, so we’ll take this last caller. My faithful assistant Mordecai, please push the button.”

I pushed and a familiar voice burst through. “You man, you are rude, and and ill-mannered and ...”

“Don't tell me, Fuledi again?”

“Yes, it is me again! I demand you apologise for cutting me off like that as well as for broadcasting such filthy language! I insi...”

Worm did the honours this time, and there was a long bleep as Fuledi disappeared. “Well, Fuledi, if you insist, I apologise for cutting you off. And I apologise for the language. And now for a bit of music. This song goes out especially to Fuledi. It is the uncensored version of Money Pimp MC's smash hit, Niggaz Can't Fuck Wit Da Gangsta Shit.”

And off went the speakers: “Niggaz can't fuck wit da gangsta shit! Bitches can't fuck wit da gangsta shit! Muthafuckas can't fuck wit da gangsta shit! Bitches can't fuck wit da gangsta shit!”

Worm removed the headphones. “Is Cecilia in the window yet?”

“Are we off air?” I asked, careful to stay away from the microphone.

“Oh yes, we are. Oh and there she is.” Worm had spotted Cecilia gesturing furiously through the window in the studio door. He went over and opened it.

“The boss is on the phone in the office. He wants to talk to you NOW!”

By the time Niggaz Can't Fuck Wit Da Gansta Shit was winding down, Worm was back from the office. “That was the boss on the phone. I am banned from studio microphones for life. Mission accomplished. We can go now.”

We got up to leave Cecilia sulking into the studio, snarling about how she had a date for the evening and now she had to stay in because The Worm was such a retard. Little did she know.

Chapter IV

Yes, I made it to my place of work the next day, sensibly attired. The clothes dried overnight, and were ironed in the morning. Well some were. I cannot make any promises for tomorrow.

I arrived with my necktie flying at an odd angle. I do not think I ironed it the right way. I arrived at the office the next day to find two huddles of Kyalinga Holdings employees at two phones. Utter silence. The speakerphone light was blinking, which could mean only one thing.

The Space Olympics.

When these boys get idle and bored they play this game, which was initially named the Space Olympics. This is because the goal, initially, was to make whoever was on the other line say the word “space” in less time than your competitor. The game evolved and became more complicated when it was found that making people say “space” was not enough of a challenge. “That order will cost you quite a bit. I mean, unless you have a pile of bills that reaches up beyond the atmosphere to that place where aliens come from...”

Caller: “You mean space?”

And we have a winner.

So they moved on. The last time they played Solomo won the race to get his client to say the word “Bottle”. It was a battle because the client was here to complain about something completely bottle-unrelated, so Solomo had to make a sacrifice. “Calm down sir. I understand that you are angry, but calling this whole firm a council of thieves is too much. Maybe you need to calm down and discuss this in a more sedate fashion. Can I get you a drink?”

The client heaved and sighed. Then, realising that he really had no further insults to offer, conceded that he could do with a drink.

“Perhaps a soda? A few jugs of soda?” Solomo nudged.

“No thank you,” the client rose to the bait. “A bottle would be fine.” The client never got to

understand why Solomo was beaming so hard as he delivered the soda, and neither did he ever get to know why a loud cheer erupted from outside the door.

Meanwhile on the other side of the office, Gomez was sweating bullets trying to signal to Janice, who had worn that figure-hugging red dress we all love so much, to walk by again, in the hope that his client would notice and make a cheeky schoolboy comment to the effect that she reminded him of a Coca Cola receptacle.

Knowing what the rules are (spectators can listen via speakerphone, but must be quiet until a goal is scored, then they may cheer) I crept up to the huddle and scribbled the question on a stray piece of notepaper: "What's the word?"

Kasulu scribbled back. "Divorce"

"I never listen to that station myself; I always thought it was for adolescents and the feeble-minded, what will all that hop hip music they play, but then yesterday I was riveted! I could not turn it off! We must, I tell you, we must advertise with them!"

It was Kyalinga himself.

"Sir, I urge you to reconsider. The moral tone of that programme is not in alignment with our firm's image. We would like to portray ourselves as a wholesome family-friendly company, but this programme would seem more interested in breaking up marriages," I recognised the voice of Solomo, reigning champ.

"Since when did this company have an image, let alone a positive one? I have been married for eighteen years and have cheated on that sour bitch at least three times in each of those years. I would get rid of her if I could."

Solomo closed in. "Sir, you don't mean..."

"Yes," Kyalinga reasserted. "Get RID of her completely!"

Gomez' voice came in next. Were in there baiting the boss?

"I agree, sir. It is not our job to protect the morals of society. We need to find a way of thingy our role from the role of the churches. What is the word, when you don't do the role of the church?"

Ummm..."

Kyalinga offered a suggestion. "Separate our role from the role of the church?"

"No, not separate. It is something from..."

That was a desperate move. Kyalinga did not buy it. He huffed on. "Whatever. I want advertising on this station. I want our products on this station. I tell you, this is going to be the next big thing in radio. Can you imagine, even me, a man of my age and sophistication, being tricked into listening to a hop hip station like Force FM? Those guys are marketing geniuses. Soon that show will be the hottest thing in the country and I want our adverts to be right there when everyone in Uganda is listening in."

Solomo jumped in. "Okay, sir, I grant you that this new daring experiment of theirs was successful in gaining a boost in ratings, but is it sustainable? How long will the new listeners gained continue to tune in to hear insults and dirty language? Soon they will return to other stations where the deejays discuss other things like how Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck separated. Did they separate or did they fully you-know?"

"They never actually got married, so it did not even count as a separation," Kyalinga, surprisingly well-informed about world affairs, corrected.

"Forgive me for asking, but how did you know about that?" Gomez incredulously gasped.

"I am a sugar daddy, man. I get to know these things from my young girls who want to talk about them in between bouts of vigorous sex," he explained. "Which is another reason why we should advertise with those people. This weekend, while I was reclining in the bed, for the first time me and the girl, whichever one it was this time, for the first time ever we were both interested in the same programme on radio. I don't even know who that Sentamu Wycliff character is, but I was quite engrossed. You see, we are crossing generational barriers."

"I guess it's a good thing that you have someone to go to when you and Mrs Kyalinga finally call it quits," murmured Solomo in a valiant last ditch effort.

"Look, you are my promotions officer, not my marriage counselor. Get an advert and book space on that station for that show. Get it done, instead of obsessing about me and my wife," the boss said

with finality.

“Yes sir. I’ll do it right away.” And we heard a shuffling sound as Solomo turned round. In a second he slouched, with a defeated posture out of the office.

“And you,” Kyalinga was now talking to Gomez, “look at the accounts and so on to see how I can get this done without spending too much money.”

Shuffling sound, and Gomez emerged from the boss’ office.

“Imagine. These kids think they are my marriage counselors? They think they can advise me about affairs and marriage? Don’t they know that I am such a prolific lover that I have probably already slept with both their girlfriends?” the speakerphone continued crackling, as Kyalinga mumbled to himself. Solomo gave it the finger as he approached. He was just about to hang up when Kyalinga’s voice crackled,

“Divorce indeed.”

The entire office spent the next half hour arguing about who won, and I could not get anyone to explain to me that our show at Force FM had been a citywide hit until almost lunchtime, when Gomez figured that my connections could be of use.

The next day I had to meet our old friend Schwemps. He had called the previous evening to say he wanted to meet me and ask for a favour. He said he would not be available all morning and that afternoon would be much more convenient for him. Worm snorted when he heard that I was going, and said Schwemps was being arrogant; if he wanted a favour he should come to me, and not expect me to go to him. It was as if he was summoning me. Whatever, I say. If you call me to your office after one pm I don’t call that summoning me. I call that you buying me lunch.

Schwemps and I go way back. Back in the days I like to call my humble beginnings, lounging under mpafu trees in the square of mizigo called Kithito Plaza, the young Schwemps was working his way up the ladder of a career in journalism. The Worm once asked which particular field Schwemps intended to practice in: “Which branch will you pick? Rumours, gossip, propaganda or shameless praise-singing?”

Schwemps answered curtly. “The one with the money in it.”

How times have changed. We no longer live in mizigo, and no longer eat mpafu (new invention out. It's called processed juice. Cool.) but the progress of mine and The Worm's lives has not matched the pace at which Schwemps has rocketed up the track in this rat race. He has, I will admit, made a bit of a name for himself. He has got awards, notoriety, trips to Belgium and Sweden and all those places where they take African journalists and, most importantly, he has got money. This lunch, I knew, was not going to be soggy matooke and tough beef.

I swaggered into the Daily Trumpet offices with the confidence of a man who knows that the empty stomach within him is an asset to have at that moment. I sauntered in like a man walking into the waiting room at Heaven. I walked right through to the Trumpet bullpen and sat down at one of the comfortable chairs they keep against the wall. I leaned back to stretch out my stomach muscles and possibly make them larger as I waited for Schwemps to finish the argument he was having on the phone.

"Lies! You are lying through your cosmetically-enhanced lips and lying through your varnished teeth!" he yelled.

Crackle came through the phone. Sounded like someone laughing.

"I don't care! That is false!"

Crackle, giggling now. The person on the other end was enjoying themselves.

"There is so much fabrication in that report you could make a tablecloth, a pair of bedsheets and a full set of curtains!"

Crackle. Giggle turned into a guffaw in full flight. Schwemps was livid. He threw the phone down, but the conversation was far from over.

"Look at me," he yelled across the room. I looked over and saw that he was talking to someone in plain sight-- at the other end of the bullpen, just twenty feet away. She was still holding the phone with one hand.

"Look at me!" yelled Schwemps. "You see the way I am rolling my eyes? It is incredulity and derision. Rolling eyes almost doing a full somersault in my skull!"

If there is one thing that gets Schwemps hot under the collar it is when he thinks he is being

brilliant and someone somewhere doesn't share the view. He will rail and rave and rant. If you have no umbrella, stay at a safe distance. The spit travels far.

“And who is it that dares dispute your point of view, Schwemps?” I asked, after he had failed to get his opposite back on the phone and was just floating about his desk fuming aimlessly. It was clear that I would not be disturbing any important journalism if I let myself in now. I always make it a point to wait until people are free and ready to give me their full attention before I enter their offices. Because if they ever entered mine when I was busy I would kick them the hell out, and I don't want to sacrifice the moral right.

“It is that Aisha Lakema. That lying, treacherous...”

“The one with the perfect smile, and the absolutely mesmerising eyes and the knockout badoinkadoink?”

“Yes. That one. The glorious badoinkadoink does nothing but blind you to the fact that she is a crook.”

“But her voice is like chocolate syrup flowing down a slice of chocolate cake embedded in chocolate ice cream. Moreover when there is beer nearby.” I found it hard to believe that anything disparaging could be said about the owner of such a voice.

“Be that as it may, she is a liar.”

“Well, if she is a liar, I can live with that. I am not a good listener anyway,” I concluded.

“Mordecai, this issue I have got to talk to you about, this favour I wanted to ask you...”

“By the way, isn't it lunchtime? I should be out eating lunch, but you called me here. I should be eating lunch, I think,” I loaded the hint heavily.

“Okay, we shall talk about it further during lunch. Come to think of it, I am curiously hungry. I feel thirsty, too. My throat is dry.”

“Good thing you haven't been doing any shouting or anything,” I smiled. But, before I could further sarcasterise Schwemps, in she walked.

It was as if the room had suddenly been filled with angels and flowers and rainbows all playing harps and singing songs by Lauryn Hill in a classical choral fashion. Did the sun just shine brighter? Did the

air just begin to smell sweeter? Did the general ambience of the room and quality of life improve drastically?
And to what could this be attributed?

Aisha Lakema was standing right there before my eyes.

“Can I help you?” Schwemps asked sourly.

“Sempebwa, I know you just don’t want to throw all your work out of the window, that is why you don’t want to believe that your whole story is based on a fabricated report, but in the interests of people not saying I work with hacks, I have generously brought the proof all the way over here... Oh, I didn’t know you had company.”

“Oh, you mean you have brought your lies all the way over from your desk so that they can pollute mine with their deceitfulness? And yes, I have company. This is Mordecai, a valuable source. Mordecai, this is Lakema, a treacherous liar.”

“Hello, Aisha. Great fan of your work. I have always wanted to tell you that.”

She responded with effortless grace, which was a bit of a disappointment. I could have worked with a bit of bashfulness. “Why thank you. That is kind of you. Is this your first time to visit the Trumpet?”

“No, I come here quite frequently. I come over to check on this colleague of yours here, to make sure he is not bothering the rest of you guys too much. Hah hah.”

“Now, you think you are going to be there trying to chat up chicks in my office by making jokes at my expense, Mordecai?” Schwemps was not pleased.

Chapter V

The larger the favour the nearer to a beer, that was a safe formula to follow. But that he chose lunch implied that it was a simple task, no biggie. Besides, he liked to eat well and compounded this with a penchant for showing off. I wasn't complaining. Where the mangoes are falling of their own accord, my life's philosophy says, there is no need to climb trees.

We arrived at a shaded al fresco outside the city centre. Al fresco means it is outdoors but there are no flies.

This place was known as The Parish and was quite posh. There were no public transport routes to take you there, and if you showed up in a cab, the waiters took extra long to serve you. They served drinks in glasses, and had NO STRAWS. Need I say more?

No, I did not get Aisha's number, but I did get quite filled up with a dish called beef stroganoff. It consists mainly of mashed potatoes, but do not let that throw you off. The potatoes are just to trick you into thinking that you are in for a bland time food-wise, so that when the pyrotechnics arrive you are taken completely by surprise, which makes the whole experience all the more fantastic. The surprise comes in the form of the titular beef. Beef, at the best of times, is pleasant enough and punters often think the one thing that will make a meal of meat better is, perhaps, a glass or two of liquor. This genius fellow named Stroganoff, a Russian from Minsk as far as I can gather, took that thought to its logical conclusion and yes, stewed the beef in booze. Beef stroganoff is beef cooked in brandy. After that meal, I was ready to sell Schwemps my house, wife and two kids, if I had any of the above.

“So, what is this favour you wanted to ask of me, good friend? You know I would give you my wife and kids if I had any.”

“You offer me your wife and kids every time you eat my food, Mordecai. The day you get married, I shall be there to collect.”

“Unless I succeed in my new life's ambition, that is. If Aisha becomes my wife then all you get is the

offspring. I will be keeping the woman.”

“What I want from you, Mordecai, is for you to deliver The Worm to me for an exclusive interview.”

“That is not much to ask. Be sure that you have my compliance. I shall do everything in my power to deliver The Worm for as many exclusive interviews as you require. However, there are three questions I should ask. The first is what do you want to interview The Worm exclusively about — has snoring in staccato suddenly become a newsworthy topic? And if so, why are you talking to me instead of talking to Worm about this? The third question is gimme Aisha's number.”

Schwemps laughed a bellyful and the spices from his beef stroganoff blew into the air. “Are you not aware of your housemate's sudden rise to fame? Hasn't he told you that he is now the biggest star in the city?”

“He is not the biggest star in the city. If he was, there is no way he would not have told me. I mean, that boy has an ego the size of the Indian peninsula. He cannot keep this stuff to himself,” I replied. “He has been on suspension from his place of work for the past three days, so all he does is loaf about the house. His conversation consists mostly of which side of the sofa is lumpiest at the time and he has not mentioned stardom of any magnitude.”

“Well, it has only been two days, and The Worm, while considered by many to be rather bright, can also be exceedingly slow on the uptake. It is possible that he does not know yet, especially if he hasn't been out in society.”

“I have been out in society, and I don't get what you are talking about either.”

“No offence, Mordecai, but you are not any faster on the aforementioned uptake than your buddy. Anyway, you must have heard something. That radio broadcast on Sunday is the talk of the town. Everybody wants to know who this fellow is!”

“I have got wind of that, come to think of it. It doesn't engender confidence in this Kampala to see what it takes to grab the people's attention,” I mused delicately. I was about to begin one of my famous rants about the state of Uganda's morals and the degeneration of the collective intellect. I like this rant

because it makes me look so much smarter than everyone else. Anything my opponents say I can point at as proof that Kampalans are stupid.

“Well, I am sorry people did not respond with as much eagerness to the broadcast of one hour of German opera, but be that as it may, everyone wants to know who that guy was, and soon they will find out. What I need you to do is to make him promise to talk to no one but me about this.”

And now my confidence began to flag. Maybe I was too hasty in promising to produce an exclusive Worm. “Why didn't you ask him yourself? Why did you go through me? I know it is not that you think I am in a better position to convince him than anyone else.”

Schwemps grinned a spicy grin. “Mordecai, you and I both know that The Worm is a natural slut. Once he finds out that the newspapers are interested in him, he will spread himself out as freely as Anita—do you remember Anita? No one will ever know who the father is.”

“You mean who the fathers are.”

“You mean it happened again?”

“Twice since you left Kithito Plaza.”

“Well, it isn't me,” we both said in unison, though deep inside we were not a hundred percent sure.

“Anyway, I need him to agree to give me an exclusive before he realises what is going on. I will pay him for it, if need be. Just don't tell anyone that I have offered him money.”

I was mortified. Or at least pretended to be. “Pay money to get an interview? Isn't that forbidden? What about journalistic ethics?”

Schwemps asked journalistic ethics to do the anatomically impossible and continued to push, demanding that I give him strong assurance that I would do everything within my power to deliver The Worm. He even went so far as to promise to put in a good word for me with Aisha, but I was not sure that him speaking about me would not do more harm than good. So he promised to put in no words whatsoever for me with Aisha, and the deal was sealed.

When I returned to the office to play on the computer for the rest of the afternoon, I was slightly inclined to take up Schwemps' offer. An envelope of unearned money is always welcome, especially if he decided to deliver it to me over another lunch. I would be dreaming of beef stroganoff for the rest of the week, the way my belly was feeling. In fact, I thought, perhaps I could start now. I turned from the office and began to walk down the corridor that led to what some people call the Conference / boardroom, but what those of us with better grounding in reality refer to as the bedroom. Closed doors, air conditioning, away from the noise, only visited by bosses according to a predetermined and easily accessed schedule, and furnished with comfy seats, it was the perfect place for afternoon naps.

On my way down Gomez harshly hissed my name out. "Gwe, Mordecai, I hear that your cousin works at Force FM."

I did not floor him with a single punch for implying that The Worm was related to me. I just grit my teeth and explained things.

He met my laboured and detailed and elaborate speech with a curt "wharrever" then pursued, "I want to be the one getting this deal sealed. The one of advertising things. You know them."

I gave another detailed and elaborate speech about how there was no way on earth that show would ever be repeated. "Why does everyone even think that the thing was planned? Does everybody really believe that people sat in a room somewhere and decided that the way forward in the business is to get a foulmouthed DJ and a cantankerous critic to go on air and broadcast nonsense? Come on. The whole thing was a mistake, and the station will never allow it to happen again."

"Oh, yes he will," Gomez was positive. "Because the listeners want it."

"No they don't. I was there. Most of the listeners were furious. They hated it."

"Well, listeners like to get furious. They love to hate. I tell you, this show is a goldmine. Kyalinga is right."

I was not entirely sold. And Gomez had had some sort of bean and fish meal for lunch and the evidence

was gushing out of his mouth in large puffs, so I terminated the conversation and continued on my way to the bedroom.

Just before I was out of earshot, however, he gave his last effort. And it was a valiant one, which would prove successful after I had had my nap and met The Worm at Club Zero that evening.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” he shouted. You see, appealing to the Ugandan in me was a masterstroke. Told you, unearned envelopes cannot be resisted.

When I got home that evening my quarry was plonked on the couch, not a muscle moving. Okay, his nose twitched for a second there, but otherwise there was no sign that he was even alive. The television in front of him was a hundred times more animated. The Worm, meanwhile, wore a dazed look, eyes balls of glass, mouth lopsided and slightly agape, arms limp. He was wearing a shirt and tracksuit pants that looked grubby and over-worn and tired, even though I could have sworn they were among the clothes Caldonia washed just a couple of days ago.

“Ugh, disgusting! Dude, have you even moved from that spot all day?”

All I got was a grunt that seemed to have made the entire journey from the dark and slimy depths of a fast-atrophying brain all the way through the dark and deserted path to the grimy mouth by crawling on its hands and knees.

“You have been there all day! You filthy lazy disgusting pig-boy! You have been there all day!”

Another half-hearted grunt. His eyes stayed fixed on the TV, even though there was no sign that they were even registering what was on.

“I find you in the same spot you were in when I left in the morning,” I was muttering as I walked out to the kitchen.

“No,” he muttered.

“It speaks! It’s alive!” I mocked.

“When you left in the morning I was in bed. I have only been in this spot since eleven-thirty.”

I was genuinely concerned. There is nothing so sad as watching precious youth wasted, nothing so awful as watching a life spill down the drain.

“Get up. You have to go out of the house. You have to do something constructive.”

“Grunt?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we hit Club Zero.”

A few minutes passed during which the willing spirit marshalled some strength to move the weak flesh from the sofa. Eventually, a light appeared in his eyes and the muscles began to flesh out on his previously limp arms. It took a full twelve minutes for him to become fully animated, to rise from the sofa and begin looking for a jacket, but he was finally at the door.

“Most people who spend days like that, splayed half-brain-dead in front of televisions, are diagnosed as depressed. Are you sad that they put you on suspension?”

“Let me see, I don’t have to wake up early in the morning to go and fight with that chain-smoking witch Cecilia over a cup of coffee that tastes like Diego Maradona’s urine diluted and coloured black, and I don’t have to sit in that studio listening to inane gibberish in forced American accents all day long, and I don’t have to smell the manager’s horrible cologne for four days. Yeah, I am depressed.”

“Well, don’t sarcasterise me, I was just making an observation. You are acting the way people act when they are depressed, that’s all,” I defended myself.

I could sense that he was not in a good mood. Maybe his days of absolute leisure had not been as fulfilling as he had thought they would be. This was good. Not because I enjoyed the thought of his misery, but if he was disappointed and I drew him out of his bad mood, then he would be more amenable to my requests. Club Zero was the place to go.

Chapter VI

Club Zero has a well-earned reputation as the seventeenth most sleazy bar in Kampala. This number is scientifically verified. Doc, Ogwal, Frobisha, JC and a whole bunch of regulars fell into a heated debate one night after a visiting Kenyan declared, “This must be the sleaziest bar in the whole city.”

Someone agreed, but Doc didn’t think the question could be so easily settled. “Well, you know that they also have lap-dancers at Hollywood Bar in Bwaise these days?”

“Are they sleazier than ours?”

“They are older, flabbier, more desperate and on average 40% cheaper,” Doc reported. So we were all forced to conclude that Club Zero was the second sleaziest bar in Uganda.

Until Anselm from the corner mentioned that the women in Express Club in Katwe had invented the “toe job.”

So Club Zero, we agreed, was the third most sleazy pub in Kampala.

But JC had heard of a place in Kisenyi where the sign says No Smoking and someone had added the very important elaboration “Cigarettes.” Smoking other things was highly recommended.

Then Frobisha remembered another place he had heard about where the pork is served with spinach as well as other greens. They are not garnish, you are supposed to clear your plate. At the end of the thing we were at number 17, because we beat out Kireka SuperNightClub, which does not slaughter the cats for its sumbusas in full sight of the patrons.

Club Zero is seedy, dark, dingy, damp, crowded, and the only place a husband can go to, commit adultery, and then return to his wife and plausibly explain, “I just tripped and fell and landed inside her.”

This is the only place where you buy the liquor for your glass and the fuel for your car out of the same bottle.

Okay, maybe I am exaggerating—the waragi could not really fuel a car. Just a moped or one of those low-capacity motor scooters.

So we had Club Zero, derelict since Obote was kicked out of the chair, and, though its patrons all grew in fortunes as the Museveni era brought prosperity to those fortunate enough to be positioned under the tree when the mangoes started falling, it remained a steadfastly hideous place. All over the premises you have an array of economically diverse punters. The broke mingling with the old men from Uganda Revenue Authority who got their fortunes together before the anti-corruption probe. Outside this place we may mock each other, snob each other, ignore each other, grin and sneer at Frobisha and JC and the Tyson for still being Loungers after all these years, but here we were all the same.

As we sat down and began to drink, I began to fling hints and pointers around, trying to get people talking about the broadcast. I was not disappointed. Several people had heard it and those who hadn't had heard about it. Half of the crowd seemed to think it was a disgrace and a moral abomination. Doc asked the hooker on his lap to move her hairweave out of his face for a minute so that he could make his point that it was wicked and vile. The other half thought it was very entertaining, and looked forward to tuning in the next week. It didn't occur to anyone that it was not a new show, and no one had recognised The Worm's voice. They barely remembered the name of the critic ("Isaac something, or Isma, or thereabouts," said Doc) but they remembered the words. All over, people claimed to be quoting portions of the show, even though they were exaggerating grossly. ("Remember the part when Sentamu said he was going to drive to the studio and personally slice the critic's freaking head off?" squealed Magda the busty barmaid.) It was making me dizzy the fact that The Worm, through all this, never rose up to tell that he was the one in the studio, and that the whole thing had been his idea. He just drank and listened and pretended to find it all funny.

"I would like to get drunk, Worm, so please, stop acting odd so that I can relax," I said.

"Acting odd?"

"You love being the centre of attention. How can you have the whole bar talking about you and fail to revel in it?"

He took a deep gulp of his beer and said, "I have no idea what you are talking about."

The conversation was yanked out of my control when the attention of the whole bar was turned to a more intellectually attractive topic. A man at the far end had been cornered by his two girlfriends. They demanded he tell which of them he was cheating on.

I awoke the next morning to a shocking sight. And it is not easy to find anything shocking after a night at Club Zero. The television could be wearing socks, there could be a goat's head in the middle of the living room, a total stranger may be picking lice out of his underarms in the bathroom and all this could be fully explained by the fact that the previous night was spent at Club Zero. But this phenomenon was beyond anomalous. It was The Worm wide awake, alert and fully dressed at seven a.m. in the morning. My mind worked fast to reconcile the odd picture before it with the reality it was accustomed to. I concluded that the clock must be wrong. I must have overslept and it must be approaching noon. That would mean that the sun was as wrong as the clock, because the rays were beaming clean and bright and diagonal through the windows. I could hear school-kids insulting each other on the way to school. Their voices chirped through the windows. "You are a nyonyihead." "No, you are a nyonyihead." "You are both nyoniheads." "Fuck you!" The typical sounds of a morning. Maybe I was still dreaming. But what was The Worm doing in my dreams? I have a better brain than that.

"Get up. We are going to work," he said. I stretched for the mobile phone so that I could call up the nearest psychotherapist. I did not worry about the cost because, if I was dreaming, I would wake up before I had to pay.

"I have been thinking about what you said last night, and have decided to do the interview with Schwemps."

"Hold that thought," I said. I climbed out of bed and headed for the lavatory. I don't know how this

happens, or what relationship these organs have, but I find that a good shit in the morning always helps my brain wake up. As if by clearing my bowels I clear my mind, too. It is not something I tell people about, because I do not want to go through all those obvious jokes, but it is uncanny and effective. When I was through and the mental faculties were crisp and alert and in order, and the toilet faculties not so crisp and clear, I emerged and confronted The Worm.

“Last night you said you did not want anyone to know you were the one behind the infamous broadcast. If I recall correctly you threatened me. You said you will make Magda the busty barmaid give me syphilis. What would occur in the middle of the night to make you change your mind? Did you get a fast-acting dose of the aforementioned syphilis? I hear that it causes mental shake-ups.”

“I thought about it, that is what happened. Intellectual activity, and not syphilis,” he explained. “It just occurred to me that this may not be a bad thing.”

“Why would it?”

“I got a phone call from the station the other day. The station manager wanted me to come back to the station and do the show. I did not understand what he was talking about. I feared that he had seen through my plan and realised that by sending me on suspension he was just giving me a brief vacation. When he said he wanted me to return to the studio and present, I was afraid that he was trying to give me a real punishment.”

“Scepticism. It is a useful survival trait. You didn’t tell me about this phone call,” I remarked.

“It fell outside the parameters of any of your business,” he explained. “Anyway, I was hiding from him and the summons. When I heard the lumpen hordes, as I fondly refer to the patrons at that bar, talk about what a sensation that show was, my initial reaction was to hide further. Your offer to get me in the papers with Schwemps was just as scary. But later on in the night it all became clear.”

I saw light at the end of the tunnel. I saw envelopes.

“You see, Mordecai, if I become a big star, then the manager will not merely summon me back to work...”

I could see the glint in his eye. His pupils began to look like huge heaps of banknotes. You may have trouble visualising that, but it is a Ugandan thing. It happens when people see money approaching.

“He will woo you back to work!”

“With salary increments, perks, and so on. I may even get to be Cecilia’s boss!” Worm smiled, and his teeth began to resemble new electronic appliances.

“That is what I was telling you last night,” I urged. “That this was an opportunity for you to grow in your career and you should take the bull’s horns and grab them as that famous book, Rich Dad Poor Dad, instructs us all to.”

“I don’t think the book advises anyone to assault cattle, and furthermore, that is not what you were telling me,” he argued. “You were telling me that I should stop spoiling your deals by being selfish. I can quote you. You said, ‘Just do the stupid interview and stop blocking my money line.’ That is what you said.”

“I was grabbing the bull.”

“More like spewing the bull.”

“Let us stay focused,” I suggested.

“Okay. Does the sun always look like this at this time? It is very yellow.”

“I said, focus. You have decided to meet Schwemps for the interview that will make you a national celebrity so that you can negotiate a fat salary raise from your station.”

“I will not stand in the way of your sought-after envelope either. You can take whatever Schwemps offered you and enjoy it. All I will ask for is, perhaps, a small percentage, but not too much. I am going to be a rich radio star, after all...”

“You are a whore,” I said.

He answered in a bashful voice, “You know. Well.”

“Welcome, Worm. Have a seat. This is my colleague, Lakema,” Schwemps waved his hand around the seat and around the edge of the table where the divine Aisha was sitting. She got up and offered her hand to The Worm. “Pleased to meet you,” she said, smiling dazzlingly. I don’t want to exaggerate, but I am sure mobile phone reception in the area was disrupted briefly while she smiled.

We were at the stroganoff restaurant. That is not the official tax-paying name of the place. The words The Parish are painted on a sign above the door. But I don’t care about them. Stroganoff place is what it is to me. I had brought The Worm for his interview.

I do not know what Aisha Lakema was doing there. Was she a reward for me? I smiled to myself in the way men do when they are trying to hide lecherous thoughts and adjusted my necktie. (I had decided to dress up out of respect for the memory of the great Dr. Stroganoff). But before I could do the leery cough and the slimy grunt and ask if she would like to step aside to another table heh heh heh she announced, “Sempebwa and I shall be conducting the interview together, if you don’t mind.”

Then, and excuse me if I say this with my eyes wide open in shock and embarrassment and my mouth hanging open, she turned to me and repeated that “If you don’t mind” part.

Like she was hinting or suggesting that I leave the table. That I was in the way and not part of the process and an intruder. Or even worse, that I was a hanger-on who just wanted to fluke a free meal with the “star”.

I kept my justified indignation in check and, saying nothing about her mother, informed her that I was The Worm’s manager and agent and that I have to be present during all press events that involve

him. “Besides, I have heard about you, Lakema. You have a reputation as a liar... Beef Stroganoff please.” I was interrupted by the waiter suddenly appearing. “I have heard that you fabricate reports and are prone to deception.”

The evil woman rolled her eyes and smiled cockily to herself. What a cunning move. I was totally disarmed. The flash of dimple and the opportunity to see those glorious eyes of hers in motion felled me and destroyed all my anger. It was pure charity that enabled me to stay at that table because had she said, “Really, Mordecai. Get lost.” In my smitten condition, I would have questioned her no further. I would have walked away.

Not too far. Just to that corner there where I could still stare at her in a slightly disturbing manner while not actually participating in the interview.

However, she just continued to smile in that divine way and cross those wonderful legs and sway those wonderful arms towards The Worm and Schwemps. “Shall we begin?” So, because of her kindness, I remained at the table.

I do not remember what happened for the first fifteen or so minutes because they were full of Aisha. Her skin is very smooth, but there is a little imperceptible zit where her jaw meets her ear. She has a very small left ear that is lined in fine fuzz. An ear of that size? I wonder whether the amount of sound an ear can take in is influenced by the actual size of the organ. I see that she needs to go to the salon. There is what women call “growth” evident underneath her perm. Usually this “growth” is not a particularly appealing sight, but with Aisha, I found myself being introduced to a charming side of things. Her growth, I have to say, is excellent.

Furthermore, there is a wrinkle in her forehead that is manifest when she frowns, which she does occasionally when making a point. And another on each side of her nostrils. They blink in and out delectably. Let us go further down. Ah. There is a bosom here...

Just then the food arrived, and the spell was broken. My entire heart belongs to Aisha Lakema, but

you have to understand: this beef stroganoff business is serious. I can allow no distractions.

The food is not as absorbing as my Aisha, though, so I was able to hear some of what was going on around me as I wolfed it down.

“Should I have humble beginnings, so that I can rise from them, or will that reduce the glamour of my position? What do you recommend?” Worm was asking.

“The truth would be best, Worm. Why don’t you tell us where you are from?” Aisha was replying.

“Where do you think would sound coolest?” Worm asked again. “Should I have studied abroad? Maybe New York or London?”

She changed tack. “Where did you get the nickname Worm? And what is your real name?”

“I think New York is good. But I don’t want to forge an accent. I hate it when people do that. How do I explain having just arrived from New York when I do not have an accent? People will think I was only there for three days.”

“Sempebwa, can you give me some help here? What are you laughing at?”

I looked up at this point to see that Schwemps was doubled over in throes of extreme mirth. Aisha was caught between strained patience at The Worm’s answers and exasperation at her colleague not sharing in her suffering.

“Is this what you call an interview? When no one is answering my questions?” It was The Worm and not Aisha who was asking this.

Schwemps finally settled down to say, “You’re the one who insisted on coming on this assignment. Told you it wasn’t going to be easy like those cabinet ministers and politicians you are used to. Let me handle this.”

I looked up again from my food to notice that he was turning to The Worm and saying, in a business-like fashion, “Hello Worm.”

Worm replied in the same fashion. “Hello Schwemps.”

“Why did you broadcast a radio show filled with obscenities and insults, Worm?”

“It was because I felt that the radio industry in Uganda is in need of something new and exciting, Schwemps. I feel that things are too static. The listener out there deserves more than the same old menu day in day out. I felt the time was right for something spicy and new.”

Schwemps turned to Aisha. “You got that?”

She performed the sexiest pout of irritation this side of the Sahara. It was almost good enough to stop me from laughing inwardly at her and the way her arrogant snobbish ass had been squarely put in place by Schwemps.

Nooooooooooooooooo! Why is it over?! I want more!

Chapter V

The Worm's new habit was getting on my nerves. I am accustomed to him and his inclination to do stupid things, and usually they make me laugh scornfully, rather than frown and wish they would cease, but this one new habit was quite grating. It had always mildly annoyed me to see others do it, and so naturally I had the same reaction when my roommate adopted the practice.

The habit was a few pairs of sunglasses, which he had taken to wearing constantly. Day and night, indoors and out, there seemed to be a pair permanently welded to the bridge of his nose.

"What is it with the shades?" I asked, with a not-entirely-concealed sneer. "What is it with you so-called 'stars' always wearing shades? What is it with that?"

"I used to ask myself the same question," he replied, fingering the hinges of the current pair, "until I became such a star myself. Now I find I can't seem to get the damn things off. It turns out we cannot help ourselves." He sighed and smiled as if he had said something that even made remote sense.

"You do consider yourself a star? One who is so called?" I sneered on.

"It is not that I don't detect the sarcasm, Mordecai, it is that I can't be bothered to react to it." He pushed the sunglasses further up his face with his finger as if to wear them even more firmly. "And here we are," he said, as a ding rang through the elevator indicating that we had got to our floor.

Yes, we had been in an elevator. He was wearing sunglasses in a lift. You begin to see why I would be peeved.

We stepped out of the lift and walked down a little corridor—he with a bouncing gait, and me shuffling and hunched because in the back of my mind I was embarrassed to be seen with him. I wish he would not walk like that. Maybe he could try to shuffle and grope around a little bit. Then people will think he was blind and excuse the shades.

In a few metres we were in the lobby of Force FM. The reception area had changed since the first

time I came here, I was noticed. No, the furniture and other fixtures were still the same, but what made a radical difference were two things. One is that the receptionist, on seeing us enter, began to smile and flutter her eyelids and coo at The Worm. She even went so far as to actually be receptive to me.

A clue as to the reason for this change could be gleaned from the second radical alteration to the premises: along the wall, opposite the visitor's chairs, were three picture frames, in which were hung three newspaper pages. Off each page glowed a photo of The Worm, grinning underneath his sunglasses as a headline above or next to his head proclaimed, respectively: "Radio Rebel Speaks Out" (in the case of The National Informer) "He dares to tell the truth!" (in the case of the Gleaner) and "Meet Worm: Force FM's new sensation" from The Trumpet.

When I saw these, my mounting ire at the silly sunglasses subsided, for then I remembered the bigger picture. This was not just about me and my petty peeves. My old friend was seeing great success, and I should be happy for him and continue to support him in his career growth.

Which I had been diligently doing, of course. I absently tapped my belly as I looked upon the framed newspaper pages, remembering that for each one of them, there was a stroganoff lunch in my stomach and an envelope in my pocket. I was not jealous at all. I was fully supportive. I was quite happy to be the wind, as they say, beneath his wings. As anyone who understands showbiz knows, in the shadow of every star is the opportunity to make money trading off his name.

Those interviews were only the beginning, too. I had already begun to plan for the next stage—a series of publicity stunts to feed the gossip pages with. And we hadn't even begun to tap into the opportunities television offered. After remembering this, all the annoyance vanished. I put my hand on The Worm's shoulder and ushered him away from Cecilia the flirty receptionist. "Come, on star," I said, with all genuine warmth. "We can't chit chat all day long. We have work to do." And we proceeded, me bouncing almost as buoyantly as he, into the studio for the show.

The Worm wafted into the studio in what seemed like one fluid movement, from the door to the swivel chair behind the microphone. This man was getting very very comfortable with his new position in life, I could tell, watching him lean back in the chair, headphones snug over his nut, shades gleaming in the studio lights.

I stepped more curtly to the side and sat down quietly behind the— well, I could tell you the technical terms and dazzle you with them, but I have elected to be honest with you in this narration, so I will tell you the truth. The least exciting of the monetary opportunities Worm's ascension had brought was a peanut-paying gig as the producer of his show. This was a job that essentially did itself, to be perfectly honest.

The Worm swivelled towards the microphone as the station ID sound faded out and began to speak: "You have heard the news, you have heard the business analysis, you have heard the sports discussions and you have heard the craploads of Beyonce and R. Kelly. It is now time to hear..." at this point The Worm raised a finger and pointed it at me, wriggling it in a way that would have been construed as lewd in any context but this. This time, I understood what he meant and, picking up the cue, I clicked an icon on the computer screen.

The sound of a gong chimed out.

After the gong he was able to complete his sentence: "...The TRUTH!"

I then clicked another part of the screen and a tune began to play. It was a noisy clash of drums and horns and The Worm had insisted on the inclusion of a manic scream ripped from a Warner Bros cartoon show. After it was done, I leaned back in my own swivel chair and prepared to do nothing but earn part-time producer wages for the next hour.

The Worm was speaking on: "And that truth is that Beyonce is a very attractive woman. Nice legs, nice hips, nice waist. She has nice face, nice bossom, nice waist again. Whether you start from the top and descend, or rise from the bottom, you come to the same conclusion. Nice. I don't like her music, however, and the question is, why is that?"

I shrugged when I realised he was talking to me. "Because something is wrong with you?"

“No, I don’t think that is correct. I think the problem has its source at the other end of the transaction.”

“Dude,” I repeated, “It’s you. Everybody else likes Beyonce. It’s you who has poor taste.”

“My taste is impeccable. My taste is better than everybody else’s, and if she cannot appeal to me, that is a failing on her part, not of mine. But I think we should think of solutions to this situation, you know? Think positively and try to suggest ways in which we can make her suck less so that I can actually begin to enjoy her music.”

“I can’t believe you are going to sit there and say you don’t like Beyonce...”

“Oh, I like Beyonce. I like her photographs and her music videos. I am huge fan of those, but it is her music that I cannot stand.

“But Beyonce is in the United States of America, or as DJ Roy would say, the ‘Yanarrid Stays of Omoroka’ (at this point DJ Roy was walking past the large window that opened from the studio to the hallway. His double-take did not deter The Worm.) so she could care less what my opinion is. Even if I loved her music, I wouldn’t be putting any money in her handbag because I live in the third world where we only buy...” he signalled with the ambiguously obscene finger “Pirate Copies!”

I clicked the icon and an echoing clip of from the movie Pirates Of The Carribean zipped out of the speakers. “You are the worst pirate I have ever heard of.” “Yes, but you have heard of me.”

Worm, again not missing a beat, continued. “Let’s talk about people we can help. People who will benefit from constructive criticism, which is what this show is all about, isn’t it? Producer, press that thing which tells the listeners the number to call and then we play the first song you guys have lined up for me!”

While the computer soundclip recited phone numbers at the airwaves, I turned to The Worm. “You,” I said, “Need a sidekick. We can’t continue like this.”

“I thought you were my sidekick,” he replied, as the soundclip gave way to the song.

“First of all, kiss my ass, I am your producer not your sidekick. Secondly, I am not a good actor and cannot realistically feign interest in the show. I fear that the listeners can pick up on the fact that I would rather just push buttons absently while playing electronic games on my mobile phone. Thirdly, kiss my ass

I'm not your bloody sidekick. And finally, you should call Isaac,"

"You think..."

"Oh, and in case I forgot to mention..."

"Yes, kiss your ass. I got it. You didn't forget to mention, You only forgot to mention five times. You think Isaac should come in? I agree. He is more interesting than you. All you do is defend people who can't sing."

"Kiss Beyonce's ass as well."

He decided he should call Isaac first to see if he could make it to the studio and was on the phone until the last strands of Kabiite by Vicky Namutebi whispered through the speakers. Kabiite is a nice song, I think. Gentle, lower mid-tempo and almost a ballad, sung tenderly and sweetly. It makes me feel like finding someone with soft skin to touch. Maybe even Vicky Namutebi herself. I like that song.

"Welcome back. This is Force FM and I am The Worm, here to discuss the crucial issues of the day, to tackle the pressing questions and to analyse, dissect and seek understanding on... Hah hah. Just kidding. This is where we talk shit about songs. The song that just went out is by umm... Vicky Namoooo- Namutebi, I see. My producer wrote it down. He has the handwriting of a burglary suspect who has just cracked under interrogation. If you have ever seen a forced confession, you have an idea of what this note looks like. Vicky Namutebi and her song which is called, or looks like it is called Kabiite. Hmmm."

A two-second pause. "I think I will flatter Namutebi by comparing her to one of the leading international singers on the world stage today. I mean that, taking into consideration not only this song, but her whole body of work in general."

"That is very generous of you! What international singer?" I asked as if I didn't know the answer.

"Beyonce Knowles, formerly of Destiny's Child," he replied, not even able to suppress his giggling.

The next song was by Black Bosco, a ruffian ragamuffin singer.

"I like this song!" declared Worm. "It is aggressive, and powerful and you can feel the emotion in it. That emotion is aimless anger, evidently. Rage for rage's sake, but I like the way he delivers the message. It is very evocative."

“Evocative of what?” I asked.

“Of this drunk buffoon I used to know named JB. Put in a couple of beers and out comes a bellowing ape. He was very amusical.”

The door ought to have swung open at this point to make Isaac’s entry more dramatic, but the soundproofing wall carpeting which had so intrigued me on my first visit to the studio muffled the door’s motion, so what occurred was an anticlimactic whupp. And there he was, trying to look like Batman arriving to save the day, except with a marked lack of fanfare.

“And now, look who just arrived. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my sidekick Isaac!”

Isaac leaned into the nearest microphone— there were three hanging on metal poles,— and said, “Worm, you haven’t mastered the art of sarcasm, I see. You don’t know how to do it right yet. Instead of this nonsense of pretending to call me your sidekick, just you should just say ‘Isaac, I want you to turn round and leave me in a lurch’ if that is what you want me to do. Don’t go around trying to be oblique. Mbu sidekick.”

“Did I say sidekick? I meant, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome my special guest star.”

“That’s better.” And only when he heard this did Isaac sit down on one of the two remaining swivel chairs. “What have we got lined up? Good evening listeners.”

“We would like your thoughts on Black Bosco who we listened to earlier...”

Isaac had evidently been listening in to the show and was clearly eager to speak his mind on Black Bosco. “The young man sounds like he could have a successful career as a gun trafficker.”

“You mean the appetite for destruction that informs his lyrics?”

“No, I mean only a sociopath would record a song like that.”

While they exchanged gleeful high fives over that, I found myself feeding the urge to butt in.

“But really, you guys-- what kind of critics are you who never like anything?”

“Mordecai, keep quiet. I already have a sideki— I mean a special guest star (he amended quickly when he saw Isaac grab the handles of the chair to stand up.) “Besides, why don’t you leave the hating to the callers?”

“There is plenty of hating coming from the host,” I opined.

Isaac, mollified, had leaned back into his chair when he spoke, “We don’t never like anything.”

“I haven’t heard you play anything and say you like it. I am beginning to think, Worm, that you don’t like music at all. My mother told me never to trust a person who is incapable of enjoying music. That is why I never agree to lend you money.”

“Funny. I thought you never leant out money because you never have any. You’re a brokeaholic!” and Isaac began to laugh at his own joke.

“I don’t believe you. You just made that up!” charged Worm.

“You don’t believe my mother is a wise woman?”

“I don’t believe anyone who had you for a son would even talk to you except to repeatedly spit the command, ‘Shut up, you unhygienic bastard who leaked through a condom crack!’ Ha hah!” and once again, they shared one of their juvenile high fives.

“Okay I will go back to my phone game and be silent, but only because this show isn’t supposed to be about hating me, it is supposed to be about hating every song you can get your hands on,” I sneered. “I wouldn’t want your listeners to be disappointed.”

“Well, you are wrong. I am a lover of music. I love it so much, I revere music so passionately that when I see the art of music insulted, by charlatans like Black Bosco...” Worm argued on.

“Really? Okay. Name a song you like, and I’ll find it on the computer and play it. Name one.”

And there must have been a blue moon on the rise that evening because The Worm actually had nothing to say.

I turned to Isaac. “And you? Name one.”

He shrugged. “I actually like that Namutebi song you guys played. Kabiite.”

“What? She sounds as if she has parasites!” spat Worm.

“Parasites?” Isaac retorted.

“Yes. Parasites. They are multiplying in her nose and she is trying to sneeze them out.”

“What? You must be...”

“But they are stubborn and they have dug into the inner walls of her nose and are putting up a spirited fight.”

“You are the one with parasites. In your massive ears. Do those things even work? Kabiite is a sublime work of art!”

“Guys, guys,” I was loathe to cut in before punches began to fly, but I had to.

“What!” they barked in unison.

I pointed at the console in front of me. Lights were blinking. “You’ve got callers on the line.”

“I just want to say I agree with Isaac,” said the first caller. “Vicky Namutebi may not be the best singer in the world, but that is still a catchy song.”

“Well, caller,” said Worm, “She should have let a better singer sing it then. Maybe if she had done that I would have been able to appreciate it better.”

“A better singer?” I could not resist. “Like who? We would love some examples of who you think is a better singer.”

“Um... like ... um...”

“Hah hah! You can’t name anyone. Because there is no singer you like. Music hater. You hate all music!”

“That is not true. Okay. Like...”

“Don’t you dare say Pavarotti. You have only ever heard Pavarotti once and even then, you only thought you liked it because you were thoroughly drunk at the time.”

“Pavarotti could have sung that song better,” he said, trying to sound forceful, but I could see that he was just playing his last card, even though the game was lost.

“She could have improved on the song, I will admit that,” said Isaac, finger to chin.

And Worm, who lacks the ability to know when he is being set up, asked, duly, “Yes. How?”

“By singing it in an even shorter skirt. But otherwise, her voice was fine.”

And as The Worm ranted out his opinion on Isaac’s definition of the word “fine” I realised that if anyone was going to be Batman in this studio, it would have to be me. I stretched my arm out to slide the

switch over there downwards to fade out Worm's and Isaac's mics, as I said into mine, "We shall now have a word from one of our sponsors, Kyalinga Holdings Limited."

On Tuesday night Worm, Isaac and myself, after navigating our way through a pile of haphazardly-parked cars and, of course, sneering at the plague of Ugandan yuppiehood, finally found ourselves inside trendy Stormfront. Stormfront, I am afraid, is a nightclub. A popular one, full to the brim on nights like this with the sort of people you find in such places. Twenty-somethings feeding the alcoholism genes they inherited from their daddies.

Of course not everyone shares my scorn. The management of the bar, for example, love such spenders. They are usually working in the marketing department of some company, or are employed in advertising. And you know no one is as overpaid as a marketing person.

Strictly speaking, marketers are essentially useless, so they would be overpaid if you gave them just a shilling a month, but you get my meaning.

Isaac does not share my scorn either. He is jealous. He wishes he was a marketing dude himself. He likes the way marketing dudes get to work with marketing chicks.

We were at the Stormfront tonight to attend Sundiata Dan Fodio's live show. In our capacity as a well-known music critic and his entourage.

Force FM was footing the bill. That is the only way the well-known music critic was able to secure an entourage in the first place.

"Woah. Legs are long around here," said Worm and I could see the sleaze beaming out, even through his shades.

"And skirts are short, too," added Isaac, his head swiveling like a cartoon's.

"That's what I said," replied Worm.

"Come on, you guys. Stop leering. These are people, not sex objects," I had to interrupt. "Apart from that one there. Damn. That is a tight dress. If she sneezes she will lose the entire outfit."

Sundiata Dan-Fodio was a staunch Africanist. From his sandals to his kitenge to his copper

bracelets, through his lion-tooth medallion, via his dreadlocks and finally to the permanent hint of marijuana that sat right on stage with him as if it was the band.

He played Africanist music— that is to say, he didn't feel it was his duty to entertain you, or to make you dance. He wasn't here to make you forget your worries, or have a good time.

Sundiata Dan-Fodio played undanceable, unenjoyable music whose only purpose was to make listeners feel intellectual. The pay-off was the feeling of smug satisfaction as you twirl your Toyota keys and swig your Guinness and finger your Nike shirt, that you are in touch with the true African in you. He thumped at tribal drums and wailed discordantly at the strobe lights and rolled his eyes as if he was doing something important for fifteen minutes at a time, but I guess it wouldn't have the same effect on the listener if he didn't make them really suffer.

When I saw the flash of a camera and deduced where the newspaper photographers were, I suggested to The Worm, "I think we need to move to the front, near the stage." And he replied, slightly shocked at the prospect, "But if we do that we might end up hearing the guy."

I needed to remind Worm that this was not a leisure trip. We were here to work. This was a publicity project, to show the public that Worm was interested in music, and so he had to be seen.

"Look at his face. He looks like he is reliving a childhood trauma. And he sounds like he is determined not to suffer alone!" lamented The Worm.

"Here," I shoved a large tumbler into his hand. "This beer says, 'Don't worry, Worm. I'm right here by your side. Together we can do this. Together.'"

The Worm looked, then gulped, then looked at the mug again. "Okay. I trust you. If you can make that Pavarotti caterwauling palatable, you can numb me to this Sundiata."

"Isaac, we go," I turned to prod Isaac, whose head had finally stopped swiveling around the room, but only because it had settled on one target. "Dude," I said.

"I'm not coming with you guys. You will find me here later."

"No, we won't. You're going to move," I said.

"Okay, you will find me at least four feet behind that chick. At all times," he said more honestly,

never breaking contact with a pair of jeans that had the words "Bite me" embroidered on the pockets.

I began to attempt to persuade him with my weak logic, but I was interrupted by a move so deft, so agile, so smoothly executed that it would have made Michael Jordan blush to be called the world's greatest athlete. Out of nowhere a small but decisive hand appeared, as if by ninjitsu, on Isaac's ear. The hand gripped and twisted and just like that Isaac's head was no longer facing Bite Me. He was staring at The Worm and I, his eyes wide open with terror.

We followed the arm we could now see attached to the hand down to its source. It was Beatrice, frowning. And saying, "We go to the stage. You came to watch the show, not some whore's backside."

I was afraid, as she led the way to the stage area that she would see Isaac mouth apologies out of the corner of his mouth ("I don't know where she came from. I swear I didn't invite her") or that she would see The Worm and I laugh our butts off. This woman evidently had powers science knew not of.

In the front, Sundiata Dan Fodio was receiving mixed reviews. There were some people whose eyes were closed. They were waving their heads left to right and snapping their fingers. Their posture suggested some very intense rapture was going on. A lot of these people were white women. There were a few black people, too, but these were not so entranced. They were nodding their heads and doing some kind of shoulder shrug-dance. A lot of this second type of audience member was wearing tiny glasses and was sporting dreadlocks of their own. Other people were not moving. They were staring at the stage as if it had finally dawned on them what the hell it was they had gotten themselves into. And the rest had their faces stuck inside a mug of beer.

"You see, people are not really fans of this kind of music. They don't care for the actual art. What they love is how the music represents them," I began to pontificate as we settled.

Worm was trying to empty his glass in one gulp.

"A classic case of the emperor's new clothes. No one will ever say that he is bad. They will only say he is 'sophisticated' or 'subtle' or 'eclectic' or 'not for the masses.' So he goes on for a dozen minutes at a time, no rhythm, no melody, no sense whatsoever and still gets applause and adoration for it."

"Who are you talking to?" asked Worm.

“Frankly, I don’t know.”

“Not me, I think. I am busy listening to Beatrice scolding Isaac.” She was snarling about his hanging out with wrong characters who were spoiling his character. “I just heard the word ‘stupid’ used!” I started.

“Don’t worry. She was referring to him, not us. She has only referred to us as ‘dubious’, ‘unsavoury’ and ‘corruptive’. No insults yet.”

“Phew,” I said relaxing.

When I spotted a photographer in the corner I signaled. The Worm saw a flash. He adjusted his sunglasses. “Can we get out of here now?” he asked.

“Just a couple more. That was the Informer. We need photos from the Express and the Trumpet, too. Let me find their paparazzi. Then we can leave.”

But just before we could get up that distinctive skweee sound that comes from microphones being adjusted pierced the speakers.

The music stopped.

Our relief was to be short-lived. Sundiata began to speak.

“Brothers and sisters. Karibu to my showcase. Karibu to the music of the motherland. Karibu to AFRICA!”

“Pretentious piece of shit,” Worm mumbled under his breath before he was shushed by Beatrice who almost spilt Isaac’s beer on him. Yes, she had taken his beer from him.

“All children of Africa are welcome to his show from wherever you are. Even those from other continents— we are all children of Africa. We are all originally from Africa. So we are all Africans. Karibu. Welcome.” He beamed at the group of white tourists, who clapped.

“Sundiata Dan Fodio stands for true African music. In the true African spirit. No to the cultural imperialism! No to the lies! No to the neo-colonialism! No to the slave mentality!”

There was more clapping.

“There is so much music coming out these days from our young brothers and sisters who call it African music, but it is watered down. It is diluted by western influence. Sundiata Dan Fodio no watered down! Sundiata Dan Fodio is pure like the waters of the Nile River!”

More people clapping.

“I am glad to see that we have with us a special guest, a man who is outspoken in his call for a return to the songs of our ancestors! To the soul of Africa! A man who has not shied away from demanding that the children of Africa turn away from watered-down impure songs! Brothers and sisters let us give him a hand. DJ Worm of Force FM, please take the stage and give us a word.”

And if it wasn't for the round of applause they would have heard the first word he gave was “Shit!”

“Force FM is in the house brothers and sisters! Karibu Force FM!” Dan Fodio said, pulling the shocked Worm onto the stage.

The clapping subsided into a lull when The Worm was on the stage, looking lost and bewildered and alone in a circle of light. Dan Fodio smiled and broke the silence. “Here is a man who tells it like it is. Not like the puppets who just praise the western copycats. Those who ape the American styles of music and ignore the motherland that raised them? Others may praise them, but you, DJ Worm, you tell it like it is! Welcome to Sundiata Dan Fodio's showcase!”

Worm, unfortunately, was now over the shock and was warming up to what was taking place. “I'm glad to be here. Now at least. Because I have the opportunity to speak with you, Sundiata. Dan Fodio.”

Applause.

“Named after the famous King of the Ancient West African empire of Mali.”

“Two kings: The great king Sundiata of Ghana Empire and the King of Mali empire, Uthman Dan Fodio! Great Africans!”

“I have to ask. A few questions...”

We were escorted out seven minutes later.

“Sundiata wasn’t even king of Ghana! You pretentious twit! He was king of Mali! And what’s wrong with your given name of Kizito? Baganda are not African enough for you? And why don’t you at least try to make music that doesn’t suck!!” yelled Worm as the African brothers tossed him out of the back door. Cameras flashed. I was ecstatic. My plan had worked perfectly.

Chapter VII

When one is about to carry out what we in the middle class call an executive action it is imperative that one strike an executive pose. There is no point in staging meetings with ones staff (that, of course, is what I mean by executive action. I was going to have a meeting with my only employee: Caldonia, the cleaning lady.) while inappropriately dressed.

The photos of The Worm's forced eviction from The Stormfront Bar had received a lot of attention from the newspaper-buying public and though I wish he had restricted his language to actual printable words as he yelled his abuse at the bouncers, I believe we had essentially achieved what we (and by We I, naturally, mean me) had set out to do: to consolidate the image of The Worm as a fighting rebel, the Che Guevara leading a revolution against bad music.

The only problem was the clothes he was wearing. Except for the sunglasses, the man looked too ordinary— too pedestrian. Those who did not have fore-knowledge of what was going on would think that the spectacle being photographed was nothing more exciting than a groundnut vendor being evicted from the nightclub.

We needed to sort this issue out: We had to confirm the difference between our man and groundnut vendors.

We had to bring out the fashionable clothes.

The Worm has a pile of clothes in the back of a drawer which would make the eyes of sensible, conservative people like you and I bulge, quiver and finally water, so flamboyant are they. There are T-shirts that are otherwise reasonable except for the obscenity "Sean John" emblazoned flamboyantly across the front. There are trousers with four dozen pockets on them. There are jeans with wild streaks running in every direction, making the pants look as if they have been in not one but several acid accidents. These garments were provided by Worm's ex-girlfriends hoping for a day when they would step out into the society of cool people with an appropriately attired chap at their side.

Poor misguided women who went on to find out the hard way that when it comes to changing a man, you can try, but trying is just one thing.

The Worm is one of those people to whom wearing clothes is something you do so that you don't get arrested. Trousers are just things to trap your farts. Fashion to him is a concept in the same category as Intra-dimensional nuclear mathematics: the subject probably exists, but it is not something he ever wastes time thinking about.

It's not exactly correct to assume he doesn't care what he wears. His preference for low-key, middle-of-the-road casual wear can seem to be borne of the fact that cheap plain clothes are easier, but the man actually does have a fashion philosophy. You may have heard him say the words: "I don't wear no fucking Sean John" before. Most of us take that to refer to the general spirit of consumerism but he really doesn't wear no fucking Sean John.

Unless his Promotions And Publicity Manager steps in. That was the purpose of my meeting with Caldonia this afternoon.

I wore black trousers and a shirt with real collars— not the shorts she usually sees me in on weekends. I needed to remind her that I actually have a job. Words like "responsibility" and "power" were meant to spark into her mind at the sight of me. I sat cross-legged on an upright chair. I have read in a book somewhere that this sort of bullshit helps.

And I greeted her formally.

"Good afternoon, Caldonia. I am glad you could make it today."

"To make? You want I make it den I make it," she said loyally, then looked keenly at me.

I should have mentioned before this point that Caldonia may be a very intelligent woman in actuality but we would never know because neither of us has mastered the cracked and shattered language she responds in when spoken to in English.

"You want that I make what?" she asked.

Experience has taught me that skipping ahead to the next point is a better option than trying to explain what was meant in the previous utterance. Trying to clarify what "make it" was about will only lead to a frustratingly full understanding of what a sticky point truly is.

"Remember when you washed all the clothes?" I asked.

“All clothe I wash dem. Bring dem I wash.”

“No, I mean the other week. Some time back. You washed all the clothes and left us nothing to wear.”

“Is washing. Is washing clothes. The other day. Tomorrow. Any day. But today no. Today at home husband she is waiting...” Caldonia’s face contorted. Her lip curled upwards and her cheeks puffed out and in. I had no idea what this expression could possibly have meant. It was when she performed a familiar gesture – she swiped one hand over the other— that I realized what she was trying to convey. Respectful regret.

I cleverly avoided the temptation to explain that I was not asking her to wash all our clothes that very day and just made my speech even slower.

“When can you come and wash clothes?” I asked

“I come Sataday how you say everytime dat I come on Sataday and I wash clothes.”

“Okay. Saturday is...”

“And I even clean house.” As she added this, she was looking around at the mounting piles of our trash, clearly wondering within herself how human beings can ever bring themselves to live in such a pigsty. “I cleaned this place spotless just last week. How on earth can they have made it so filthy so quickly?” she must have been thinking to herself. Not in those actual words, naturally.

“Yes. You can clean the house as well. On Saturday. But wait...” I stopped her. She was getting up to leave. “We are not through.”

“Through? Through...” She mulled over the word for a moment then finally slapped her hip and began to walk towards the kitchen.

“Where are you going, Caldonia?”

“Through lubbish,” she replied.

“Caldonia, come back,” I said. “You will throw the rubbish out later. I am telling you something.”

When she was seated again I took a deep breath.

“Caldonia, on Saturday, I want you to wash all the clothes again. All of them. All the clothes.”

“You told me when I washed all the clothes that I do not again wash all the clothes.” She seemed perplexed. But she did not seem confused. When we have a conflict of understanding, Caldonia never thinks she has got it wrong. She concludes that it is because I am crazy. Confusion never occurs to her.

“Forget that. Now I want you to wash everything.”

“You want I wash all clothes?”

“All clothes. Wash all the clothes.”

“I wash all clothes.”

“Yes.”

“All clothes...” she repeated again.

“Every single stitch...” I began then stopped myself when it was already too late.

“Stick? Stick of what? I get a stick to do what?”

Eventually we settled and the instructions were clarified. The really tough part was trying to get her to understand that The Worm didn't have to know about our meeting. She didn't get that. I surrendered and decided to retain the option of just telling Worm, should any questions arise, that she had misunderstood what I had said.

And like that our wardrobe problem was fixed. Come Saturday, there would be nothing for The Worm to wear except the Sean Jean and streaked jeans that I would have kept locked away from Caldonia while she was washing every other piece of clothing in the house.

We had another publicity engagement, and this time we needed to look like stars.

One of my duties as promotions manager for my celebrity is to handle his public visibility. A promotions manager, you see, for those who don't understand how the music industry works and could use some explanations, is basically a pimp. Don't act appalled, you always knew that musicians were nothing but whores anyway.

One of the things I need to do is manage the amount and the nature of publicity he gets— how the public gets to see my ho, and where they get to see him. This means I occasionally wangle an invite to a Society Event. Society Events, like that, in capital letters, are great places for our hos, because the public has it in their thick heads that only very cool people get to go to these sorts of parties and therefore makes the easy logical conclusion that every one who gets to go to such parties is a very cool person.

An easy way then, to gain the admiration of these sheep (that's you all) is to simply bribe, blackmail or steal an invitation to the Victoria Lager Annual Rock Party.

This was not hard. As any skilled pimp will tell you connections are very important in this business of exploiting other people's talent, such as it is, for your own profit. Using Schwemps's list of contacts, and Kyalinga's list of business associates I was able to get my hands on two VIP tickets, which I would present to the bouncer at the door of The Satin Club that night and ensure entrance for The Worm and I.

There is no university course for club bouncers. This is because club bouncers don't need to be literate. They are, therefore, often not, for all my experience, and that is why there was no danger of anyone saying, "Hold on a minute. These invites are for an Irene Magezi and a Dr V. V. Patel!"

We just breezed into the shadows and bedlam and confusion that was the Rock Party in full swing.

I am not exactly sure what they celebrate at this function. Something to do with either geology or rock music. But every year a whole lot of "socialites" show up in their most fancy casual wear or in their slinkiest, most expensive little dresses. The former for the men and the latter for the women, of course, It would be absurd if it was the other way round.

The place is usually dark and difficult to see in, because the only sources of light are these spastic little disco lights flashing up and down in unpredictable trajectories. They are sometimes green or even red, which makes things even harder to focus on. There are other lights now and again—but though these allow you to discern the fundamental differences between different human forms in the room, it's not enough for you to get a real lock on what the person in front of you is trying to say.

And you can't even hear the bastard in the first place, because there is too much damn noise going on. They play loud music with neither remorse nor repentance. You cannot hear anything but whatever din is playing through the speakers.

This sort of thing is very popular, however. When we entered the club and had taken two minutes to get used to the light or lack of it, I dragged The Worm away from the chick in the corner. He was yet to understand that he was operating in a different context than the usual. It is not easy, I guess, for a lion to relax into the role of being hunted, so used is he to being the hunter. So why should it be simpler for a hyena like The Worm?

I tugged him aside and led him to the beer. "Dude, you are a star, remember? You don't chase chicks."

"Chicks chase me?" he asked, and I smiled greasily and patted him on the back.

And soon enough two large breasts, two more smaller ones, a quartet of long legs in tight jeans and a lot of hair materialized before us. "Oh I can't believe it!" squealed the first chick. "It's you! It's the Fucking Worm of Force FM!"

He grinned in what he probably thought was a modest fashion and said, "Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say 'fucking'..."

The girls didn't even notice. Maybe because the music in the speakers was too loud, maybe because of all the hair on their heads, but they just squealed on with glee. They gushed on about how much they loved the show and how they could not believe it and they made continual references to their Gosh while The Worm grinned and preened and amused me when I noticed that he was actually beginning to look bashful. If I had known it was this easy to make him squirm, I would have made him a star a long long time ago.

"Drinks ladies?" I suggested, mostly because I had to see if a few pints of Victoria would make this picture even cooler.

"Do you really believe those things you say on air, or are you just pretending? Is it just for the show?" cooed Ashli, for that, according to her testimony at least, was her name.

"It's just for pretending, isn't it?" was the contribution of her co-bimbo, Myra. I was to find that they did this stereo act a lot, where one would repeat what the other had just said as if she was actually making a valid new addition to the discussion.

"Pretend? Of course not!" The Worm, swore, widening his eyes and slapping his chest as if he was offended at the insinuation. "We are very serious in the studio. We don't fool around, we go there to work. We really want to make a difference in the way music is made in this country."

I almost believed him.

The girls swooned at this. "You are so passionate!" cooed Ashli.

"So much passion!" chirped Myra.

"Well, I always believed that music is serious business. And it has to be dealt with seriously."

"Do you make any music, yourself?" they asked. One of them. It gets hard to tell after a while, and soon you just give up trying. There is no difference worth noting after all.

"A little," he said, which may shock you, but was actually quite predictable. Worm is the kind of guy who never tells a woman that he can't do something. A pair of fluttering eyelids accompany the question, any question, about whether he can perform a task, any task, say, a woman asked: "Can you fly a helicopter in an electrical storm?" and instead of his brain processing the true answer to that question he will be thinking, "Hey, how hard can it be?"

In a few more minutes, Worm had professed himself a reluctant expert in four different instruments and had suggested that he is also a proficient turntable deejay. I was listening bemused when Myra (or Ashli) asked, "What about Isaac? Where is he, by the way?"

I judge The Worm. I sneer and make disparaging comments about the way he behaves when in the company of women and beer. I suggest that he is morally careless but who am I to judge, who am I?

At that moment I slid to face the table and said, "Did I hear my name?"

The Worm began to talk but stopped when something kicked him under the table, causing him to swallow his words and say, instead, "Sorry, I didn't introduce my friend. Isaac meet... meet the ladies."

"It's a pleasure," said one. "Pleasure to meet you," said the other, and I noticed with a little bit

of jealousy, that they were not as excited to meet Isaac as they had been to meet Worm. No, he was not Fucking Isaac. At least not until much later in the night, but this is not that sort of story. If you want porn, use the internet like everyone else.

Chapter VIII

I truly enjoy being at the Trumpet offices. They are so plush and luxurious. I like the carpets, I like the chairs. I like the glass that shows up everywhere, from the tabletops to the windows to odd, unexpected places like right there on the wall. There is a glass slab with the name of the newspaper painted in black over it. Why did they not just skip the glass and paint the name directly onto the wall? Because they knew that would not impress me as much. I like the Trumpet offices because they make me feel special. That is why I was beaming contentedly as Schwemps lead me through their silent corridors where the only sound was the humming of hidden air conditioners, the only light coming from expensive fluorescent lamps overhead.

Our destination was their large conference room. It is one of the best conference rooms I have ever been in. Granted, my experience with conference rooms is rather limited; I have only been in a handful and there may be grander and more opulent ones somewhere out there, but the fact remains that this was the grandest one I have ever sat within and I was delighted.

It was a huge room that sprawled from here to over yonder, but it was quite full: full of an expansive table around which were arrayed several chairs of the kind which you can lean very far back in without fear of falling over. I love chairs like that.

Schwemps spread his arm out towards the furniture in a vague gesture that would have meant “come in and have a seat” if it had not been for the fact that I was already deeply reclined in one of the chairs when he waved.

“Okay, we can talk here. We have about an hour, though I doubt it will take that long. I already have an idea what you want to say.”

“I can say it very slowly, so that we use up the whole hour,” I suggested. I could certainly manage to slouch in this magnificent chair for an hour. “I could repeat myself over and over again like some people do, if that will help.”

“That won’t be necessary. We don’t really have to...”

"I could just repeat myself over and over again," I repeated.

"Now you are just trying to annoy me."

I grinned, very pleased with myself for no apparent reason.

"You want to pitch another story about The Worm, your personal celebrity/meal ticket, don't you? But to be honest, Mordecai, aren't you laying it on a bit thick?"

"I thought I was spreading him a bit thin, actually."

"Your jokes are even less funny when you say them with that smug and incomprehensible grin," he admonished.

"Perhaps refreshments might help. Give me something else to do with my mouth besides grin," I hinted heavily.

He left the hint right where I had dropped it and launched into a speech: "We have already had a personality profile with The Worm. We have had gossip stories about The Worm. We have had The Worm's thoughts on Sports. The thing is, Mordecai, The Worm is in danger of being what we in this industry like to refer to as 'overexposed'. The public, or at the very least, the Trumpet, have had too many stories about him. I don't see what else we can possibly write."

"I've noticed that you guys have a fashion feature in the women's pullout that comes out in your Tuesday paper," I suggested.

"You want to have The Worm in the fashion pullout?"

"A story about sunglasses! It would be awesome. People love sunglasses. I once saw this street kid, right there on the street, wearing sunglasses."

He hummed for a few seconds with his eyes rolling towards the ceiling light. "That sounds viable. I could get someone to write a feature on sunglasses and mention your boy in it. 'Shady Business' or 'Shady Style' or some other dreadful pun could be the headline. We could talk to a bunch of celebrities about the sunglasses they wear, and fawningly collect their airhead comments and pretend that it is important. I imagine something drippingly sweet like "Trendsetter Vicky Namutebi is never seen without her trademark designer Gucci shades. "I love Gucci," says the Kabiite star, "Gucci styles his sunglasses with the sort

of elegance and quality my fans have come to expect from me.” Lakema could write it. She likes those meaningless celebrity kiss-up stories. But what do you gain from this? You can’t expect me to ‘buy you lunch’ over just that. After all, we can write it without even talking to The Worm.”

“This one is on the house,” I smiled. I raised my feet and rested them on top of the shiny table. This posture was smartly appropriate for a statement like that. “I am no longer interested in your lunches, Schwemps. I am looking at the bigger picture now.”

I was, too. I figured that the newspapers had had their fill of Worm by now, but there were other fields to conquer. There was television. However, to get UBS interested in having Worm on their celebrity shows I would have to convince dull middle-aged producers like Irene Magezi that he was a hot item. The women’s pullout, which was designed specifically to appeal to the dullest and most middle-aged females in town, was one way to do it.

Schwemps was about to express skepticism about the source of my magnanimity and I was about to pretend to be shocked, but we were interrupted by a knock on the door.

The door skreeed open a bit and the term “bowl me over” almost became literal, because you see, Aisha Lakema’s gorgeousness is the type that packs a punch. So sudden was her appearance in the doorway and so sharp was that punch, that I almost tipped over in the chair and fell.

I didn’t actually tip over, of course. I am no amateur when it comes to slouching. I know my business. I was able to correct my balance very deftly.

“Sempebwa, quick memo,” she said.

“I’m in a meeting, Lakema,” Schwemps snarled.

“No, you’re not,” she chuckled. “You and Mordecai are talking about another Worm story. Hi, Mordecai,”

I waved a hand and stopped myself just in time from winking by asking myself if I was really sure that would not be too much.

“This won’t take a minute,” she said to Schwemps. “Memo from the chief- ‘Elias Onen, the gospel rapper, would like to stress that his stage name is Mr Jesus Saves and that reporters (this means you,

Sempebwa) should stop contracting it to just Mister Jesus in your articles.' End of memo."

"The guy's name is not Mister Jesus?" Schwemps asked. He seemed to be surprised.

"Mister Jesus Saves," she repeated.

"Phew. That's a relief. All along I've been wondering what kind of loony cultist we've been dealing with," he sighed. "Thanks Aisha. I've got it. You can now proceed on your way to wherever."

"Aisha, what do you think of sunglasses?" I called out before she could vanish from my life again.

"Sunglasses?"

"We are discussing a fashion story for the women's pullout about sunglasses and celebrities talking about why they love to wear them," I elaborated.

"You mean The Worm discusses why he loves to wear them," she also elaborated.

I continued, "No, no. Very many celebrities: The Worm, Black Bosco, Vicky Namutebi..."

"Mister Jesus," Schwemps contributed.

"Sounds like a good idea. Schwemps can do it, he's really good at those meaningless celebrity kiss-up stories," she said.

"Why don't you do it? It's in the women's pullout anyway, and I've got testes," Schwemps huffed.

"Well, I've got a report on this year's malaria urban child mortality rates. I'm busy."

"I'm busy, too!"

"You're not busy! You have nothing to do! That is why you booked the conference room for an hour-long meeting when all you were going to do was chat with your buddies in here," she accused. "Dude, I'm off to meet the WHO special malaria representative."

"She's right," Schwemps conceded, turning away from the closing door and looking at me dolefully, as if what she was right about was that DNA tests had proven that he was Michael Jackson's lovechild. "I might as well do it now."

This conference room was like the command deck of a spaceship. It even had special secret compartments with telephones hidden in them. Schwemps fumbled under the table for a few seconds and out of nowhere a small drawer slid open with a shiny telephone in it. I could not possibly be more amazed, I

thought.

He got off the table and emptied his pockets, separating a small notebook and pen from the scattered contents.

“So, I guess we are through here,” I flexed my stomach muscles slightly as I prepared to think of rising from my slouch.

“Not yet. We still have forty minutes,” said Schwemps, grabbing at the phone while simultaneously flipping through the notebook. “You can’t leave. I know you want to follow your crush and harass her some more by flirting as if you have two left feet, but you have to stay here. I have this room for an hour-long meeting. If you leave I will also have to return to the newsroom.”

“What’s wrong with the newsroom?”

“Coffee break time.”

“Refreshments!”

“Slurpy-Slurp is there.”

“Who is Slurpy-Slurp?”

Schwemps mimed lifting a cup to his mouth and emitted the loudest most disgusting slurp sound.

“So what am I going to do here for forty minutes?”

“I don’t know,” he said, dialing. Then he forgot about me when the other end picked up. “Hello, Mister Jesus? My name is Sempebwa and I’m calling from the Trumpet newspaper. I was wondering if I could ask you a few brief questions for a story we are doing... Hello?... Oh, so sorry... No, I said Mister Jesus SAVES, the connection must be bad. Hello?”

While he fumbled on the phone I plucked his MP3 player from the junk he had extracted from his pocket and prepared myself to lean right back into the chair and enjoy some music.

It’s an interesting gadget – small as a matchbox and once as sleek as a luxury car. Of course after a few months sharing a pocket with coins and keys even the best of us would succumb to a few scratches and bruises and wind up looking as weather-beaten as this, but these little MP3 players were still fashionable enough to maintain some elegance even when severely scratched. I popped the earbuds into my head,

flipped the little switch and begun to search for music.

That is when the value of the thing plummeted. They are cheap, useless gadgets, I thought as I trawled through long lists of nothing but rap music. All this money and nothing but rap? Appalling. Not even some Zaiko Langa Langa at least to redeem it.

I was about to extract the earbuds and yell into them in retaliation when something flashed on the little screen. Oh. There was a radio function. I didn't need to listen to Schwemps' awful hip hop after all. I resumed my slouch and programmed the machine to bring me Shine FM. No, not Force FM. Not when I am off duty.

The presenter was Lisa. They typically have just one name, so as not to overburden the listeners. Lisa compensated for the lack of a surname by spilling a storm of extra letters all over her presentation. She was the sort of woman who believed that all a banal speech needs to make it interesting is a fake American accent, and she believed that an American accent is best achieved with random r's.

"Lirsa coming atcha right now it's Shine Eff Erm on you dial. I horpe your feeling the laid bark vibe of this lorvely arfternoorn. Yearr."

I decided to make it easier to tolerate her stupid accent by imagining her naked.

What? What's wrong with that?

"We've just been listerning to Lionerlle Rirchie coming in wirth Hellor. Yeers. 'Hellor,' he says in thart song by Lornelle Richirr."

I like that song. With lyrics like, "I've been alone with you inside my mind, and in my dreams I've kissed your lips a thousand times" it captures the state of a man's spirit so succinctly! It paints such an accurate picture of the soul of a man when he is checking out babes that millions are able to relate to it.

"Corming up nerxxt we have a lorcal artiste, singing some R&Beer. This is Ben Kirzza with his ballard, Make Me Fear You. Stay turned to Shine FM."

Ben Kizza began to wheeze out the song Make Me Feel You. Kizza sings with a lot of energy. He really puts all his strength into his singing. That is because he has a very limited range and has to strain very hard to get to the high notes. He also saw someone wiggle their lower lips as they sang on TV so that their

voice got a little wobble in it and thought that that effect might make his own music more entertaining so, as he strains, he also wobbles his lips. The result of his effort is that he sounds as if he is having a mild asthma attack. While stuttering.

As he sang, I thought to myself that we ought to line this song up for The Worm's show on Force FM. That was when Lisa came back on air.

"Tharr sray, Tharr sray."

She said that a couple of times before I realized she meant "That's right."

"You're chuned into Shine FM. My narm is Lisar and I'm taking you thror the arfternoorn jarms with Bern Kirrza and Murk Me Ferl You. Personarrly I just wanna say sormthing about this sorng..."

Did you ever have that feeling in the pit of your stomach?

"I wornder what Ben Kirrza is trying to do with thirs sorng, I mean, is he trying to imirtate Liono Lichie? Becauurse the singing is so bard! It's jurst so bard, you knowrr? It's all so bardly sarng that I dorn't understand,"

The r's were beginning to betray her, that was one thing, and for that I would have merely mocked her mercilessly, but I could not find the energy. I was pinned to the chair by shock.

"I mean, somebody call me orn 342 345 344 and tark to me about this. Terrl me what you thirk. Is Bern Kirrza just imintarting Rhino Lichie? Do you thirnk he surks? Cos I think his sorng is just tellible and just awfurr! Carl me and tell me what you thirnk."

It was a few minutes before I noticed that Schwemps was staring at me with a look of fear mixed with very real confusion. He was holding the phone in mid air.

I pulled the earplugs out and heard him say, "There is a vein that is about to leap right off your forehead."

I didn't know how to explain what was going on to him. "Do you know what this woman is doing!" I gasped. It was not a question.

He continued to stare at me. The mixed emotions were giving way to a certain conclusion that madness had struck.

I offered him an earplug and was too steamed to take offense when he cleaned it off with a piece of newspaper before sticking it in his ear and then, on hearing what he heard, he began to laugh his ass off.

Chapter IX

“Ugandans are all stupid. All of them,” I grunted sourly. “I wasn’t talking to you.” I had to add that part, in case anyone around me felt offended. And I really was not addressing them. My attention, my face, and my words were spoken directly to my beer, so I did not see why they should horn in on a private conversation.

“Ugandans, they don’t understand, that’s the problem. When are we going to develop if this is how we behave? One person works hard and strives to overcome the poverty that is biting throughout the country. Instead of supporting this enterprising young man, Ugandans just try to tear down everything he has built! I hate Ugandans! All of them.”

“Who are you talking to then?” asked Magda the Busty Barmaid craning her neck to see if there was a small human being swimming in the glass.

“Leave me alone, Magda. I’m despondent,” I said. Magda, like all Ugandans, had only been pretending to care about my well being. In truth she couldn’t give a rat’s ass and that is why it was quite easy for her to just turn and swing herself away.

I continued my morose monologue. “With these two hands I struggled. I struggled to climb out of the pit of poverty so that we can all develop this nation of ours, but what thanks do I get?”

“Who are you talking to?” This time it was JC who had walked into the bar. He looked at me as if he was expecting me to begin to disintegrate at any minute.

“No one. Leave me alone. This is what I mean when I say Ugandans are selfish and never look out for their countrymen. Why is it that a fellow can’t come to a bar and have a drink in silence without being bothered every two seconds?”

Tyson spoke in JC’s defense. “Because a bar is defined as a social meeting place. If you want an antisocial place of avoiding people, you should go and drink in the bar’s lavatory.”

“Yeah. Go drink in the lavatory,” sneered JC, suddenly angry with me, as if I am the one who had interrupted his peace.

“Listen, gentlemen. I just want to drink my beer in peace. I don’t see why that should be anybody’s problem. Leave me alone. Go and lose at pool or cards or whatever it is you want to suck at today.”

“But drinking in the lavatory would be kind of gross,” JC muttered. “I mean, things are supposed to be going out, not in. I don’t even smoke in lavatories.”

“I know, it offends your sense of propriety, doesn’t it? Just doesn’t seem like good manners to drink in the loos,” echoed Tyson.

“Who wants to drink in the loos? No drinking in the loos!” shouted Magda from her corner.

“Mordecai wants to take his beer to the loos to drink it from there,” shouted JC back at her.

“Drink in the loos? That’s unhygienic!” shouted Doc from his table. “You can get Swine Flu like that. Why would anyone want to drink in the loo anyway?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, JC. There is a reason why the chairs are all here and back there one has to balance precariously over gaping holes. One is meant to do ones sitting, and drinking, right here,” scolded Ogwal.

“It’s not me who wants to drink in the lavatory. It’s Mordecai.”

“It’s Mordecai? What is he drinking?”

“He wants to drink it and then urinate it immediately after. Hah hah hah!”

This was too much.

“I DO NOT WANT TO DRINK URINE I JUST WANT A MOMENT OF SILENCE WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH THAT!” I yelled. “I mean, I don’t want to drink or urinate, of course.”

I should have known better. There is no way to shut up the crowd of Club Zero, of course, only ways to stoke their noise up further. And one of the best ways to make them more talkative is to tell them to shut up.

For the next hour everyone was debating over whether there is any difference between the taste of their least favourite beer brand and urine from different animals. Cows and Victoria Lager were faring very badly by the time Tyson came by to gloat over the mischief he had caused.

“What were you moping about anyway when all of this started?” he asked with no trace of

remorse. I was about to fume at him, but then, what would the point be? He had already showed me which of us was the more powerful. There was nothing to be gained from a fight.

“Have you been listening to the radio lately?”

“Worm’s show?”

“No, any other show. They are all copying Worm’s idea. Everyone is abusing local musicians and insulting callers. It’s become an epidemic. Today I heard it on Shine FM, on Rock Solid FM, on Radio Blast, on Premier FM ... and that was just the English-speaking stations. I was just getting ready to apply for a new car loan, and now my major asset has just lost value.”

“I wouldn’t say it has lost value,” said Tyson. Now this is the part when I should inform you of something very pertinent about Tyson. Tyson has an MBA. Now a lot of people have those. It’s not a remarkable thing on its own. However, when you consider that MBA stands for something to do with understanding business practices and market behaviour then people with them become worth some attention. I listened to Tyson, MBA, as he said, “This is Uganda. Of course once a lucrative idea is known, it is going to be copied. The way to stay ahead is not just to be the only one doing something. It is to be the best person doing it.”

My hand, of its own accord, flew to my chin. My head rose and fell. And the sound of a “Hmmmmm” spilt out of my mouth.

“If everyone is going to be an asshole on radio, you have to make sure Worm is the foulest of all the assholes.”

And I knew just how to do it.

Chapter X

The Worm did not share my sense of despair. To him, we were not facing the loss of all the massive popularity and fortune we had only just acquired. This was because, first of all, you need to realise just how huge The Worm's ego really is. To him, being in the newspapers and being recognised in the streets and being stopped by strangers did not strike as a major surprise. The Worm has always imagined himself to be a huge star. He truly believes himself to be the same sensation to society at large that he is in his own mind. You have heard of people who walk into a room and instantly every eye is on them? Worm believes he is one of those people. So the newspapers just confirmed this. He didn't believe that he had become popular. He only thought that society had just found a new excuse to continue adoring him.

And as for the fortune, he had no idea how much I was making off him.

So, how was I to draw him in with me?

Male bonding is a complex thing. A lot of people, such as women, think it is a simple matter of finding someone who is likely to acquiesce when you ask to borrow money and then sticking to this person like a leech, but it is more complex than that. I won't go into the intricate psychology involved except to mention that one of the aspects that encourage male bonding is shared experiences: if you can understand each others' pain.

Take my dear friend, my bosom buddy, my brother in suffering and in joy, Schwemps. When he mentioned Slurpy McSlurp, I understood exactly what he meant and was more than willing to commiserate.

Because I, too, have endured such a character.

There are people in this nation who never learnt how to drink hot drinks from cups properly. When you give them a mug of coffee or tea, they will sip at it with slurping noises. A polite writer would say these noises can offend some. I am not polite, so I will say they are fucking disgusting. I swear every time I hear it I hope that the mug or cup is ceramic and breakable, so that we can have the possibility of it

falling and smashing into pieces, enabling a freak accident whereby several of these pieces get lodged in the slurper's throat, killing him by choking him and by lacerating the inside of his neck at the same time.

We had a slurper at Kyalinga Holdings. Had, not have, because unlike the Trumpet employees, we at Kyalinga are a resourceful and intelligent bunch. We are well-motivated in times of crisis and can apply our brains to the solution of those problems that touch us directly. The only thing we suck at is work and that is because we are lazy, not because we are stupid.

Muganzi loved his coffee. He loved a cup in the morning, he loved another in the afternoon to counter the soporific effects of the cassava and potatoes he had for lunch, and he thoroughly relished it in the evening just before it was time to punch out and leave the office for a world in which all the coffee had to be paid for.

This meant that on a good day you would only hear the slurping three times. But as anyone who has ever endured the corporate world knows, good days are few and far between. It was more typical that we would be subjected to six heavy slurping sessions in one day.

Until the bright men and woman (only one of the women on staff was involved) came up with a plan.

It was very simple really. All we did was agree that we would line Muganzi's mug with a thin film of petroleum jelly. Not enough for it to be visible, but enough for it to make his coffee taste awful.

It worked for a while, until he began to suspect, from the flaw in our plan (which was that the rest of us continued to enjoy our silently-sipped coffees and teas) that the problem was probably with his own mug.

So he began to use other mugs.

Time for another meeting, and another cunning plan. Contaminate the office coffee materials. It was Gomez' idea. Mix salt in the sugar and dirt in the coffee so that no matter what mug he picks, he will not be able to drink.

We agreed that even though the rest of us would keep a separate secret stash uncontaminated for our own use, we would loudly pretend to complain every time we drank, so as to allay suspicion.

Muganzi was off coffee for a couple of weeks.

Then he appeared in the office one morning with a large thermos. He had decided to bring his own coffee in from home.

What we do nowadays is very painful to all of us, but the sacrifice is worth it. Every time he begins to drink coffee someone starts up a loud conversation about faecal matter or vomit. It means the rest of us will be put off our own beverages, but it's better than the slurping.

Of course he was not all bad. He was a human being, and not just a large, loud, pair of lips floating around making coffee disgusting. Like a surprising number of human beings he had other attributes to his character which could outshine his bad habits.

One of these was that he could not keep a good thing to himself. He had to share it. He was the leading source of obscene email forwards in the office, so he was the person to talk to about my latest plan.

When I walked in to the office, I found that Muganzi had spread the word about his latest find. The office was completely silent. Well, it would be silent for moments, then there would be a sudden burst of noise. Then a round of sssshhh, then silence again.

Everyone had their earphones plugged into their ears. Some were using their mobile phones, some had MP3 players like Schwemps, and Solomo had a cheap, simple, piece-of-crap insult-to-technology transistor radio.

Silence.

Then a round of "AAAAwww! Wapi! Shyaa! Nooo!"

Shhhhh.

Silence.

I reached into my drawer and pulled out a small (but superior to Solomo's) radio and turned it on. There was an instant eruption of objections until I pointed out that I had tuned in the very same station everyone was listening to.

Isaac's voice was saying "Incidentally, Lisa from Shine FM feels the same way you do about this song."

“Who is Lisa and what is Shine FM?” Worm sneered in response. “I don’t know what those things are but I feel in my bones that they are not things I should agree with.”

“She is a presenter at a rival radio station. Shine FM 108.2,” elaborated Isaac.

“108.2? I have stumbled upon the station on that frequency. I thought it was called Shorn FM. That is what the presenter I heard at the time, someone called Laser, called it at least.”

“The rest of us call her Lisa. She is the only one who calls herself Laser.”

“Why?” asked Worm. “Is it a cool and sexy nickname like, for example, The Worm?”

“I think it comes from the attempt to fake an American accent, actually.”

“People who do that amaze me. Don’t they see the futility of such an endeavour? Why do we need Ugandans to sound like Americans? The market for American accents has already been cornered. By Americans. Now, I know you cannot wait to hear an impassioned speech about being yourself and not pretending to be something you see on TV, a lecture about being proud to be an African. I may even quote my close personal friend Sundaita Dan Fodio and, for the benefit of the listeners who cannot see, I wriggled my index fingers when I called that clown my close personal friend, but I have a commercial break coming up, so please, go and do what you do when we play commercials, and if you remember to wash your hands after, we’ll be back in a few moments.”

As the commercial for one of Kyalinga’s mineral water brands played on the radio, I looked up at my colleagues, only to notice that they were taking off their headphones.

I could not begin to ask why they had kept them on when I had supplied a very loud speaker, because the discussion had already dove into the matter of Lisa from Shine FM and whether her accent was genuine.

“It can very easily be a real accent. I mean, maybe she spent some time in the US and picked it up.”

“It’s fake! I have never heard an American who talks like that!”

“Have you heard all Americans talking?”

“There are different kinds of American accents. Maybe she got hers from Maine or Wyoming or one of those crappy states which don’t make cool movies or produce rappers so we never hear their

accents.”

“Impossible!”

“What do you mean impossible?”

“No Ugandan has ever ever visited Wyoming.”

The rest of the show that afternoon was as brilliant as I had expected it to be. My little celebrity was swinging hard and ruthless punches. It will not be hard to keep his position at the top of the growing and stinking pile of foul-mouthed and abusive radio deejays. He was doing this by calling Lisa a “insouciant hack with less taste than the sole of an old NRA soldier’s boot”. This, in addition to suggesting that she should be investigated for on-air drug abuse. But that was not all. He called Little Ben of Rock Solid Radio a sure win for the chairmanship should the UN ever institute an international board of broadcasting morons and voiced the stern opinion that John-John of Blast FM should stick to bugging boys behind closed doors and leave the music criticism to people whose ears had not been ruined by the abuse of viagra. He also asked Kalibbaman of Premier FM to please kiss his (Worm’s) narrow black ass, and opined that the moon will be blue with red polka dots the day DJ Roy makes a valid point.

It was as if he had forgotten that he was supposed to be pouring his abuse on music and callers. Now, he was swinging recklessly at all the other radio presenters who had tried to hone on to his turf. The beautiful thing was that he didn’t even know that this was what he was doing. As far as he was concerned, he was just being Worm.

You must know by now that this is the sort of person he is. Worm was not a music critic. He was just a critic. He is just one of those people who like to insult. He will insult whatever is in sight. Tyson’s idea was that I simply move the musicians a little bit to the left and let the presenters who were attempting to rival him replace them in the target zone, then let his indiscriminate firing pepper them with barbs.

I was leaning way back in my chair, beaming so proudly. I wished I had more than just two feet to place on the desk, and more than 32 teeth to blaze at the world to express my smug sense of satisfaction as all around me the staff of Kyalinga filled the commercial breaks with arguments about how terrible the other radio presenters were. At times like these I like to talk to myself, referring to him with the proper

respect. "Mr Mordecai, sir, you are a genius."

Then I respond with all appropriate modesty: "That I fucking am."

Chapter XI

The weeks that followed, however, were to prove that whoever thought that that idea was genius was a moron. It only goes to show, you should never trust Tyson. No good ideas ever came out of Club Zero. Nothing comes out of club zero but socially debilitating alcohol abuse habits and pubic lice. I should have known better.

The two weeks since Worm started volleying his cannons at other presenters had been a free-for-all, with every radio station talking about nothing but other radio stations. At first they all seemed to gang up against The Worm, which was good, I thought, because, well, he can take the abuse and dish enough of it right back, but then they started going at each other. I could list the details of the melee, but the truth is that the whole thing was so messy, I don't even know if there were any details. All we could see was that radio was a flurry of accusations of intellectual dearth and moral corruption and small penises and you could not tell who was saying what about whom.

Don't get me wrong. I could give a rat's ass about whether Lisa gets the respect she feels her intellect deserves, but the problem was that in this blurry flurry of noise, Worm was just another voice lost in the crowd.

When my mobile phone rang one morning, interrupting the broadcast it had been relaying of a BBC World Service reporter talking about the growth of microfinance projects in the slums of Ouagadougou, (I could not listen to Ugandan radio without coming as close as a masculine fellow like myself can to tears) and it was Schwemps on the other end, I, naturally answered curtly.

"What!"

"Maybe I should have had Aisha call you instead."

"I'm so over that chick, Schwemps, you don't even know. I despise all you press people."

"You are talking about the profiles she wrote, featuring Lisa, John-John and Kalibbaman?"

Mordecai, news is news. We have a duty to serve the public with information.”

“You have a duty to kiss my ass, then.”

“Anyway, this should cheer you up. I am calling about another story. And don’t even try to mention the word stroganoff, cos this time, I am doing YOU a favour.”

“I mean, how the hell does that treacherous woman turn coat and interview Lisa? How do you even write down what she is saying? Hrr brr crr drrrr? Is that what you write? Cos that is all I hear when she talks!”

I could hear Schwemps grinning on the other end of the line. I continued to rant.

“And Kalibbaman— doesn’t he exhaust his entire English vocabulary after just one paragraph? I swear...”

He cut me short, rude bastard. “Well, I am putting together a story about the new trend in radio broadcasting...”

“New trend? Call it a trend? That’s like calling a nuclear explosion a ‘bit of a flare-up’, don’t you think?”

“Newspaper jargon. We categorise this sort of thing as a trend. And this is the part where you get interested and begin to smile as joy returns to your bitter little heart. I want to focus on The Worm as the one that started it all. “

I waited. Then I realised that he was also waiting for me to say something.

“What?” I repeated my earlier question.

“Well, I thought you would be happy to hear that your boy is getting back into the spotlight.”

“Schwemps, you know The Worm and I to have been close friends and inseparable buddies for years. You have known us since we were poor little losers living in dingy little shacks in Kithito Plaza. You have witnessed our friendship grow through thick and thin, through poverty and prosperity. And through all this, haven’t you learnt anything? Haven’t you figured out how this dynamic works? Let me spell it out. I don’t care about The Worm. I care about ME!”

“So whether The Worm is in the limelight or not, what matters is how you benefit?”

“Duh. Obviously!”

The wheels clicked and whirred in the head on the other end of the line.

“I have to have a story. I mean, I was the one who wrote about The Worm in the first place, but now she goes and one-ups me with not one, but three profiles of foul-mouthed radio deejays. I have to take this story back. I have to reclaim my position as the one who owns this story.”

Then he said, “Okay. I’ve got it.”

“I don’t think you have. If you had you would not still be on the topic.”

“How about I write about you, the architect of the trend, the man behind the scenes, the true source of this new broadcast revolution?”

You would not think that blank stares can be transmitted through mobile telephone networks, but I think he got it, because he responded to it, saying, “We can have lunch and have an interview.”

Chapter XII

“I am The Worm, you are the listener, this is Force FM and that is Isaac. Somewhere in the background my producer, Mordecai, is lurking in the shadows reading Harry Potter books but he won’t be bothering us much, so let’s start this show.”

These days, The Worm was taking a more pro-active approach to his work. He sensed that my heart wasn’t in it anymore, so he took the reigns and pushed his own buttons for his own damn sound effects.

I had Sudoku to play. Leave me alone.

The first segment of the show had gone on as expected. Slurs and barbs flung at Shine FM, Rock Solid, and a particularly virulent riposte to Kalibbaman’s prior assertion that The Worm was a fugitive from the law. Worm went on for a bit too long about how he had no way of knowing that the girl was underage, and besides, he didn’t do anything, they just talked. And besides, she wasn’t even all that. She had a hairy back. He didn’t even know her. Etc.

I had heard the story before. Many many times. The truth was that she was a bit hairy, but not too hairy for The Worm to go all the way. The only problem with it is that she did lie about her age. That woman was at least 24. She just didn’t want anyone to know it because she was still in S3.

I made myself busy with the Sudoku puzzle in the day’s newspaper while they raved and ranted on.

“Well, Worm, you have spoken at length about John-John’s tendency to use his ass instead of his brain tissue, and I think we are all up to speed,” said Isaac, “but let’s address other topics. We have a lot of material on the shelf. I have just played a new song here by Vicky Namutebi. Her latest, actually. I am sure the listeners out there would like to know what you think about it.”

“I agree. Talking about Vicky Namutebi’s song might be more interesting than giving you all more details about the way John-John deserted the army. So let’s discuss this song.”

“It’s called Ye Gwe Wekka,” said Isaac, “and that, for those listeners who don’t speak Luganda, means ‘It is only you’.”

“And I think it is only Vicky Namutebi who could pull off such a tender ballad with such panache. I tell, you Isaac, when I listen to this song, I truly begin to believe that she is singing to me personally.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I find my soul transported to a special place by her voice, and I feel a connection, a togetherness with Vicky Namutebi, so well has she performed the song.”

“Tell us more.”

“Normally, when I think of Vicky Namutebi, I imagine her and Jamila from Flamboyant Chiques together with me in bed at once, but this song has had such an impact that I have banished all the other women from the bed. It is only me and her. I give this song my full endorsement!”

What was going on?

“Let’s hear from Black Bosco. This is his latest dancehall tune. It’s called Thunder Upon Them,” Isaac said, reaching over to push another button. “But remember, listener, if you wish to sing along, that you should pronounce the refrain as ‘Tonder Pon Dem’. Careful distinction.”

The chaos that always emanates from Black Bosco’s mouth did as is always does for three minutes, during which I could hear Worm and Isaac loudly ignoring the song. Instead, they were discussing the upcoming Falcon’s game and whether the new power forward was fast enough to take the team past Sadolin Power in the championship.

I’m not a big sports fan, so I don’t know what game they are talking about, but I do know that Black Bosco does not feature in it, so I did a double take when the song ended and The Worm said, “What a gripping, totally gripping performance. I tell you this song just grabs your mind and holds on to it for the duration. The power, the intensity. I love it.”

“I love the way the message of the song comes through loud and clear and completely unambiguous. You know, some people will say I am taking this too far, but sue me. I am ready to say that Black Bosco is well on the way to becoming Uganda’s own Lucky Dube!”

“STUPID BASTARDS!”

“Listeners, it seems our producer, Mordecai, has just woken up. What’s up, Mordecai? You seem to have something you would like to add to the discussion.”

“Yes. I do. I would like to add sense, truth and reality to the discussion. This song is complete bullshit. First of all you can barely hear a word that fool is saying. He just mumbles and grunts and gargles through the verses. The only way I could tell that the refrain goes Tonder Pon Dem and not Dondobundum is because it is written on the CD sleeve. What message are you talking about? Who knows whether he is talking about the fight for social justice or the fight for a fresh joint of marijuana?”

They looked at each other exchanging the most patronising “poor misguided illiterate fellow” glances and laughed.

“Ah. Mordecai, Mordecai,” smugged Isaac.

“Mordecai, my producer, either the side effects of the medication you are taking for your ringworm have not yet worn off, or it is true that people from your village are all born with tin ears. The message of the song is so lucid, and so unambiguous, and I, for one, fully endorse it. Tonder Pon Dem!” smugged Worm.

“Of all the crapulent...”

Isaac cut me short: “I think this is the sort of thing that happens every time an artist, or rather an artiste, breaks the mould. He is bound to be misunderstood by the less sophisticated listeners, like Mordecai here...”

“And everyone else from Katungulu village...” added Worm.

“Because they just don’t understand. Worm, were you born in the city?”

“Born and bred. The only time I have ever been to a rural area was when I got really broke and had to find very cheap liquor, so we went to this bushy place just between Kampala and Entebbe for crude waragi.”

“That is why you, and I, and all the more urbane, more with-it and in-touch listeners are the only ones who can understand this song, while Mordecai just proves that the adage is true: You can take the

Ugandan out of the village but, alas, nothing can ever extract the village from the Ugandan.”

“Especially not Katungulu.”

“We have a commercial break coming up, then we shall check out some more music from Roughish Boy, Master Eaglet, Flamboyant Chiques and Mister Jesus,” said Worm.

“That’s Mister Jesus Saves,” corrected Isaac.

“That’s what I said,” said Worm, and the gong sounded, “This is Force FM” intoned through the speakers and some chick began to chirp about how her shampoo had changed her life and could change yours.

“Can someone please tell me what is going on?” I demanded. I know I sounded as flustered and confused as I looked because sometimes a figurative punch in the stomach is almost as bad as a literal one.

“You go back to playing your Sudoku or reading the agony aunt columns or whatever you are doing back there while the rest of us are working,” said the same smug tone.

“I demand an explanation!” I snarled, which, unfortunately was the best way to make sure they absolutely refuse to give me one. They went on to discuss the way the Falcon’s centre field goal average was pivotal to the whatever in the playoffs until the commercials ended. When Worm and Isaac began to talk about how spiritual Sentamu Wycliff Sentamu’s new jam was, I had enough. I walked out of the studio.

Because they don’t allow you to swig copious amounts of whisky in there.

Chapter XIII

The Worm had his most enormous, most flamboyant and most hideous sunglasses on this evening. That was not three pairs, that was one pair which held all three distinctions. It was a sure sign that he had a big date on.

“Who is the lucky girl?” I said, without any attempt to conceal the sarcasm.

He squinched his nose to adjust the spectacles. “I am on my way to another press interview actually. I have a reporter waiting for me.”

“So, I repeat, with the same amount of sarcasm, who is the lucky girl?”

“You aren’t upset about the fact that I am going on interviews that you did not set up?” he stopped squinching to ask.

“To be honest with you, Worm, that well is dry. There are so many filthy and depraved and disgusting deejays on the radio these days that no one is willing to bribe me for just one interview with you any more. As such, I couldn’t care less which reporter you don shades to lie to.”

He grinned as the moroseness of my tone reassured him. “Ah well. At least one person still cares. She wants to interview me as the pioneer who launched a broadcasting revolution.” He waved his hand as if he was displaying a banner headline. “ ‘Worm: Revolutionary Pioneer.’ Can you see it?”

I waved my hand to erase his banner and replaced it. “ ‘Worm: The Ass From Which All This Shit Originated’.”

“When I thank all the people who helped me get to where I am, the people who supported me, the people without whose efforts I would not have made it to be where I am, guess who won’t be mentioned.”

“Guess who could not possibly in a hundred years give less of a shit.”

Sometimes the clouds of rage and disappointment are so thick over ones head that their billows conceal the silver lining, and you need a little jolt to remember that they are there.

“I will make sure I mention you as favourably in my own upcoming interview,” I said, remembering the lunch I had scheduled.

“You have an interview? The press these days have no standards, do they? There is no depth they will not succumb to,” he sneered.

“Yeah. Kind of like the broadcast media.”

“So, which muckracking paper is this that wants to talk to you, and why?” his curiosity piqued.

“Why is because you could say I am the man that fed the food to the ass that spewed all this shit. I am the man behind the scenes, the originator of the originator. I am your father, in short. And who is the prestigious Trumpet,” I chuffed.

“Well, that’s interesting. I have the Trumpet, too.”

“You can’t have the Trumpet. Schwemps promised me Stroganoff and if this is the last time I ever eat a free lunch off your notoriety then I swear you had better not get in my way. I must have that food!”

“It’s not Schwemps. You think I would wear these shades for Schwemps? It’s this leggy ka-hotness called Lakema. She thinks she is going for an interview and has no idea how how potent the seduction she is walking into is going to be.”

“Wait. Did you say Aisha Lakema?”

“Yes, Gorgeous woman. I’m off now.”

Now I found that, to my chagrin, I was envious. Even though I had told myself that I was over that treacherous harpy and her magnificent legs and those beguiling eyes that melted your soul into crystal clear streams of water then went behind your back and wrote about other presenters, even though I had told myself that my feelings for her were dead, apparently they were not. For a surge of jealousy rose in my chest.

“She will never sleep with you!” I swore, because that is what jealous guys do.

“Of course she will,” Worm replied calmly. “I am The Worm, one of the smoothest liars in Uganda

“She will never sleep with you. She has class.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter. Lies and smooth talking can more than compensate for my lack of class.

That is why people like me always end up getting more women than people like you who have all the looks.”

“I have all the looks?” I mumbled, somewhat disarmed.

“You see how deadly my skills are? That was just a sample. One lie, i.e. that you have good looks, and you stop arguing and instead start blushing at me. I am lethal. I cannot be stopped.”

Epilogue

In the end, he was wrong. Aisha did not succumb to his slimy lies. His sunglasses were so large, apparently, that they cancelled out all his much-touted charm and smoothness. She would have none of his nonsense. He tried his best, but bambi, she wasn't going anywhere with a dude who wore sunglasses at night.

Rather, she came to her senses and went out with me instead. Yes. I got the girl. Then she really came to her senses and has instructed me quite sternly, to delete her number from my phone and never to ever call her again.

Neither The Worm nor I got our interviews in the Trumpet, even though my Stroganoff lunch was very heavy and very pungent and my breath filled the halls of Kyalinga Holdings for the best part of the afternoon of the day I held it.

The problem was that the revolution in broadcasting Schwemps and Aisha were racing to chronicle just vanished. It just disappeared. All of a sudden all the radio presenters stopped abusing and insulting and ridiculing each other. They went right back to ignoring other stations and focused all their attention and their fake accents on exaggerated praise for the mediocre music they played.

I guess this can serve as a cautionary tale on the evils of corruption because things had come full circle – the radio presenters were now receiving cash bribes to praise new songs.