THE AMBITIOUS STRUGGLE

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An African Journalist's Journey to Hope and Identity in a Land of Migrants

by

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Dedicated to my mother, Hajjati Khadija Nakkazi

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Acknowledgments

The prophet of Islam once said whoever cannot be grateful to thank the people who have helped him or her, that person cannot even begin to be grateful to thank God.

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MY ROOTS

Chapter 1

Gombe Hospital is one of the oldest and biggest government institutions of its type in Uganda. Situated in the town of Gombe—the heart of the Butambala district—the hospital is about seventy kilometers from Kampala and only three kilometers from my mother's home village, Bukkogolwa. I have been in the hospital a couple of times visiting ill relatives or picking up relatives who had given birth there. I can pinpoint rooms in each hospital ward where a close relative spent the last days on earth or where newborn infants slept with their mothers after their birth.

I still remember the details of every hospital visit except obviously for where my mother Hajjati Khadija Nakkazi stayed on October 21, 1980 when I was born. I could not imagine what my grandmother Hajjati Maryam Nassozi a.k.a. Musebeeyi felt during that month because three of her daughters gave birth in the same hospital. Jamida Namutebi a.k.a. Mamma Jamida—at seventeen, the youngest of the three—had delivered her first-born Bukenya on October 9 and, after Mamma gave birth to me, another daughter Jalia Nansubuga a.k.a. Mamma Jalia gave birth to her second child on October 29.

One would have thought the women either had engaged in a unique competition or had deliberately agreed upon a schedule choosing the same periods for conception, delivery, gender, and clan fathers. However, Bukenya and Matovu belonged to the Ngabi clan while my mother faulted on this one with her boy Yasin Kakande (me) being born into the Ngenye clan.

I was the third born among my mother's children, following Mayi Nakubulwa and Faridah Nanfuka, and the ninth among the children of my father, Edirisa Kalule. As a matter of clarification, in Ugandan culture, all children call their mother's sisters "Mamma" and to avoid confusion, one appends the person's name—for example, Mamma Jamida. However, I would refer to my natural mother simply as "Mamma."

After I became an adult, Mamma Jamida told me I was returned to the village when I was just one so that Mamma could resume her nursing career at the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council Hospital in Kampala. Mamma Jalia followed Mamma's example and returned her son Matovu. With Mamma Jamida's child, the

trio of one-year-olds was reunited under the same roof and under the care of Museebeyi and Mamma Jamida, who stayed at home.

Six months afterward, all three of us contracted measles. I was the sickest of the group but all three of us were admitted to Gombe hospital. The nurses referred to Mamma Jamida as the teenaged mother of triplets, a reference she never bothered to correct. She wrote to Mamma about my sickness, with the letter being delivered by way of the Uganda Transport Corporation public bus system. The bus traveled to Kampala in the morning and returned to Bukkogolwa in the evening, so a passenger who missed the morning connection had to wait until the next day. Likewise, the same situation applied to the afternoon trip from Kampala.

The next day, my mother came to Bukkogolwa on the evening bus, insisting upon carrying me back to Kampala that night but she had no option, as there were no buses at that time. In the morning before any nurse could appear in our ward she had removed the IV drip that had been attached to me and took me in her hands to wait for the bus.

A nurse who worked in Kampala, she obviously paid no attention to the warnings from village nurses concerned about the risks of taking a small ill boy on a public bus, according to Mamma Jamida's recollections. Mamma was mostly unhappy with the treatment I received at the village. As soon as I entered the hospital in Kampala, Mamma Jalia came to visit, following Mamma's actions and bringing her own child to Kampala as well. Mamma Jamida told me later that she felt annoyed—even betrayed—that everyone just picked up their sons and left without any word. No one had compensated her for the costs of our care and she also was not working.

Because of the numerous inoculations I had been given at the village hospital, my left leg became infected and, as a result, I could not walk well like the other two. Once I recovered from the measles, my mother resumed the battle with doctors, moving from one to another in order to have my leg properly mended. Musebeeyi always reminded me that had she not struggled so hard or had spent all of her money I would have ended up lame for the rest of my life. Even today, I still walk with a slight limp.

Chapter 2

Bukkogolwa has a population of fewer than twenty families with virtually everyone related to each other. At the time of my birth Butambala was just a county among the eighteen that comprised Uganda. It was also under the Mpigi jurisdiction, up until 2010 when the Museveni government separated Butambala from Mpigi, making it an independent district as part of the nation's decentralization program.

My parents divorced four months before my birth and neither ever bothered to explain why they separated. However, I also dared not disturb the need for discretion or privacy, as our culture treats the parents' marital life as such. However, my paternal grandmother Hajjati Safiyya tried to explain the circumstances when I was a teenager. She was curious whenever I visited about whether or not my mother talked about her. I had never heard my mother mention her at all. Yet, she was not convinced, as she continuously pestered me but my answer at each interrogation was the same. At one point, I asked her why she thought my mother would talk about the grandmother to the children. She replied, "Me and your mother were two parallels. In fact I was responsible for your parents' divorce." This momentous revelation came as we placed a bunch of cassava on our heads as we completed the morning chores of digging in the field.

"Kalule," she said, referring to my father, had always made mistakes in choosing his spouses. She continued, "Before your mother came, he had Joyce, the mother of Sarah, Sauya, Saida, and Sophia (my elder half sisters). We warned him about getting married to Joyce because she was an educated girl and a Christian but he wouldn't listen."

Now, my grandmother was on a roll. "Their marriage ended with Joyce taking him to prison where he stayed for some days. We then thought he had taken a lesson; then he picked your mother and married another educated girl, arguing she was, after all, a Muslim.

"Whenever I visited their home I would be dismayed to find a home of a man and woman, leaving their home in the morning and returning in the evening, after work. They were changing maids every time and for the times they didn't have maids they would do their home chores together at night. That

was not the role of a woman," my grandmother said with the strongest of emphasis.

"I talked to your mother to give up her work and concentrate on her home and when she wouldn't listen I had to ask my son to divorce her. I did not care whether she was pregnant. After all she was only giving birth to girls (referring to my two elder sisters) and this was Kalule's second problem: He had eight children with just one boy from all his previous marriages. Could you imagine?"

My grandmother barely stopped to catch her breath, almost as to ensure that I would not interrupt her narrative. "So one weekend they came to visit me here and I told her directly she was not the right wife for my son and she replied she would separate and had no objection if it pleased me. That was the end of their marriage.

"We got Kalule another wife, Hanifa, from a village who had not gone to school. Unfortunately, she couldn't bear children and he cursed our organized marriage. He was again to marry one more wife and divorce in less than a year—still with no children. After that he got Nassuna (a.k.a. Mamma Namugga) and he relocated Hanifa here (Buikwe village) to stay with a new one."

Throughout my brief stays with my grandmother I noticed that she had no friendship with any of her son's wives. She had a complaint for every wife, accusing some of being non-Bagandas—who represented the biggest tribe in Uganda—while claiming that others used witchcraft to control their sons. Despite her obsession with dramatizing the family affairs with a theatrical flourish, she loved me, wanting me to love her like a "Grandi." She often insisted that her relationship with my mother should not interfere with the warmer dynamics of my relationship with her. During my one month stay with her, she asked the imam at the home mosque to let me lead prayers. She also wanted me to be among the team of his sons to lower her in the grave when she died. I would be the only grandson on that team. Unfortunately, she died in 2009, when I was in Dubai and I only came to know of her passing two days after her burial.

Chapter 3

I was seven years when I saw my father for the first time. Mayi and I visited him at his Bwaise home, where Sarah his maid received us on our arrival. Daddy was working as an accountant at Makerere University in Kampala, the biggest and oldest higher education institution in the country. Waiting for him to return from work, I fell asleep in a sofa chair and I woke to his voice, which demanded that I greet him. Still groggy, I fell on my knees because in Bugandan culture children and women greet their male elders while kneeling. I called him *ssebo* (sir) but he demanded that instead I call him, "Daddy." He inquired about school and if I had already eaten.

He then took me into his lap as he ate his dinner, which was served by another woman who I did not see when I arrived earlier in the day. She was my new stepmother, Nassuna Mayi. Daddy told me she had a baby girl called Jamida Namugga, whom I already had seen. My sister Mayi, who was about four years older than me and was sitting on a floor mat, gave Daddy three school reports: mine, hers and Faridah's. I was at the top of my class, news, which thrilled my father who shouted out loud for everybody in the house to come and see how he had put a bright boy on the planet but no one appeared.

After dinner, Daddy ordered the maid to prepare my bed from the sofa pillows, and there was a female voice—my stepmother's—from the bedroom protesting that she never wanted to see me sleeping on or soiling her chair pillows. It was my stepmother speaking. Mayi whispered to my dad that I didn't wet the bed but Daddy already had changed his mind. Deciding to have me sleep on the floor mats, he brought two single bed sheets and covered Mayi who already had fallen asleep in the chaise lounge. I still remember how uncomfortable and restless that night was. At some point, I joined Mayi in the chair and in the morning when Daddy came to wake us for morning prayers, he immediately checked to see if I had soiled the floor mat because I had been sleeping in the chair with my sister. He was relieved to discover that everything was fine and sent me out to do my morning ablutions before prayers.

We stayed for one week and I was completely out of sorts, feeling homesick and missing my mother. Each day during the visit, I demanded that Mayi tell Daddy I wanted to go back to my mother.

When we finally arrived at Mummy's place her first question concerned the money for the school fees. It was the first indication I had that our visit was really a mission with the goal of collecting funds. Mummy told her sister Mamma Jamida that she had planned on registering me in an orphanage school if my father refused to contribute the fees for schooling.

After their divorce my mother was married to Hajj Ahmed Matovu with whom they had Sumayya Naiga and Abdul Wahab Matovu. She remained in her own home that was provided by the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council Hospital where she worked as a nurse for more than ten years. I joined Luggo Primary School, a Muslim orphanage institution built by Saudi Arabia's World Muslim League that offered two curricula—in secular and Islamic studies.

Mayi already had been boarded at the Nalinya Lwantale Girls School and I always envied her when she returned home in her blue uniform carrying a suitcase. In the neighborhood she had no rivals when it came to her fluency in English. Even the nurses we called "Aunties" at Mummy's hospital praised her for her well-spoken English. Auntie Teo always told me—in words that I still remember clearly to this day—that, "Yasin, once you go to a boarding school you will speak good English like Mayi." If she had intended on reading my mind, she had accomplished her objective. Speaking like Mayi or better than her became my aspiration and the news of being in an orphanage boarding school gave me hopes of achieving my dream.

Chapter 4

My first night in the Luggos dormitory was a nightmare that still is fresh in my memory. I dreamt fitfully about home but I awoke often to the distracting light coming through the open windows along with my fears of falling from the top level of my triple-bunk bed. Morning came brutishly early—even before dawn had fully settled in on the day—with a loud bell clanging away as a matron went from bed to bed, urging all of us to wake up for prayers. Suddenly, I was missing my mother tremendously and started crying as I went down to the bore hole for *Wudhu* (ablutions). The others stripped off their clothes to shower at the bore hole, as one volunteer pushed the bore up and down to bring forth water. We stood crying and naked in a line, waiting for our turns and we shivered in the cool morning air. Meanwhile, the matron shouted from her perch for everyone to shower quickly as she warned anyone who dallied around would be beaten if he was not showered by the time the call for prayers sounded. I noticed some kids just passed through the bore for barely one minute without fully showering and I did the same. As we dressed, the matron inspected us, touching our body only to discover that some parts had received water and others were as dry as they had been when we woke. Without a further word, she beat those who had bathed themselves so carelessly, including me. I returned to the line to ensure my shower had cleansed my entire body.

Ismael Numba from my village came a few weeks after I had arrived at the school. I had made the transition rather quickly, feeling like an old hand at the school who could easily console the school's newest arrivals. Ismael was shy and lonely and I can still remember he was dressed in a pair of short khakis and a pink shirt that showed a spot on the front crest pocket where a school badge once rested. I realized it could have been part of his uniform from his former school. However, I didn't realize at the time that we would become lifelong friends not only in Uganda but also in Dubai, where I live and work today.

At the end of my first year at school I had passed in a third position to the primary three level. My mother, proud of my academic report and my performance especially in the Arabic language subjects, encouraged me to share the news with her father

Sheikh Hood Kabamba. As imam at the Gombe mosque, he was responsible for the imams and administration of the mosques in the parish. Sheikh Hood especially had a talent for his moving eulogies at funeral rites. I still remembered the first time I saw him preach at a funeral, when I was seven years old. He spoke with a captivating sense about what happens to a dead person from the time his soul leaves the body to when he is lowered into a grave. The image of the first hard night in the grave where the soul is restless and is challenged by relentless questions simultaneously terrified and fascinated me. After the funeral, I woke up several nights thinking that I had seen the angel of death summoning me.

When the Sheikh saw my school report, he strained to make out the writing because his eyes had been dimmed by the effects of age. He asked me what I had read at school and I proudly announced that I already had memorized all the *surahs* (chapters) in the last *Ajzaa* (part) of the Quran, which is called *Amma*. The old man brightened and asked me to confirm that, indeed, I could read all thirty *surahs* without looking at the text for prompting. He tested me by reading a few phrases and asking me to complete the texts. He tested me in *Surrat Mutafifina, Shamsi,* and *Nabba*—in all of the *surahs* I had committed to memory.

Noticing his immense satisfaction, I knew that my memorizing the holy Quran had created a new, intimate bond to my aging grandfather. On Friday he showed me among his friends who were old sheikhs like him. Still no one believed that at eight years old, a boy could commit to memory all the holy texts. One of the sheikhs also offered to test me again, reading a few phrases and asking me to complete the texts. And, as I demonstrated to my grandfather, I succeeded to their astonishment. They asked me what else I had learned. I also had memorized the forty *hadith al Qudsi*. This time, however, they never tested me. I guessed some of them didn't even know the *hadiths* themselves but instead they asked me to read some of these *hadiths*. At last, one of them told Sheikh Hood that this boy with eyes exactly like him was also taking on all his knowledge.

"It should be good you start training him to preach while you are still alive," he said. On the following Sunday, Sheikh Hood presided over a funeral rite in our village for a woman I didn't know but her name was Sarah. She had committed suicide by swallowing

a small watch battery cell. Sheikh Hood asked me to prepare one good *Hadith Qudsi* to read to the congregation and to explain what it means. I knew the meanings to only ten *Haditha*, as we always memorized the texts before we learned the meanings behind them.

I selected one about prayers that indicates the first thing to be accounted for on an individual's day of judgment would be one's prayers. If they were in order then everything for that person would be accepted as good. However, if they would be found wanting then that person would have failed the test. It was my first time to stand among the congregation; my mother also came for the funeral rites but she was unaware that I would be among the preachers. Afterward, she was distressed about her father's decision to make me stand before the congregation; if she had been consulted she would have refused. She was surprised to see that I could speak in public with a clear, audible, confident voice, showing no fears or hesitation.

The congregation was impressed and many offered money gifts to me after the sermon I gave, which had lasted less than two minutes. From then on, I made it a habit to always have my holidays in the village and I would go with Sheikh Hood to several places preaching at mosques, funeral rites and *Mauledis* (the prophet's birthday celebration).

Sheikh Hood's youngest son—my uncle—who also was called Yasin, was three years younger than me. We would sit in tandem on the Sheikh's bicycle when we went to the mosque. As we grew bigger and he weakened, the Sheikh could only manage to carry one of us on the bike. We would take turns chasing and running after the bike. Eventually, as the old man weakened yet further, both of us would chase after the bike but he no longer could pedal as strongly and as quickly. It was sad to see his health deteriorate and eventually he was bedridden for two years until his death in 1995, when I was fifteen.

Chapter 5

After three years of schooling at Luggo my mother decided to relocate me to a primary school in Kampala. I had been getting sick so often and had to undergo two surgeries, so she decided it would be better that I resumed my schooling near her home. I finished my primary schooling in the city and I graduated with outstanding grades.

Naturally, I was thrilled about going to the Kawempe Muslim secondary school, one of the best Muslim schools in the country. School fees had to be paid up front in full for newcomers and requirements for uniform, library and laboratory fees were mandatory as well. Mummy had to take a loan from her employer at the time, a clinic in Makindye. Mamma Jamida and Mummy escorted me to the new school in a rented car. Unlike my first night at Luggo, Kawempe was much different and more familiar.

Many of my old student friends from Luggo, including Ismael, also were there to help make the transition easier for all of us. I was not long in my O level before my mother started having troubles with paying school fees. Her financial responsibilities had tripled with Mayi going to A level, and Faridah enrolling at a nursing school in Kamuli. I was sent home frequently to collect the school fees, and, as a result, I missed several weeks and lessons. Returning to copy notices and revising schoolwork was easy but also several concepts—especially in science courses—were difficult to grasp immediately and catch up with the others. I was not the old genius but a mediocre one now in class getting a few good grades in arts while performing so poorly in mathematics, chemistry, physics and other science courses. At this point, I decided to give up the dream of becoming a doctor.

Mamma asked me to start going to Daddy's place and collect some assistance so during the holiday of my senior two levels for the second term, I went to Daddy, meeting him at a mosque in Wandegenya where he often had his evening prayers. I could sense he was excited to see me, as he pulled me by hand and we went outside the mosque to talk. After we exchanged small talk about how everyone at home was doing, I pulled out my school report from the back pockets of my trouser and he frowned as he read

it. I could see the furrowed lines on his face as he scanned the marks and kept on asking if that was my real report. It was as if it was a stinking bad performance. The truth was that I was just ranked sixteenth out of 72 students—still well within the upper one-fourth of my classmates.

He immediately asked me why my science subjects were so poorly done and why I only managed distinctions in the arts subjects. I had reasons for my poor performances especially because my regular absences from school were linked to the issue of unpaid school fees. Yet, somehow I failed to explain the circumstances sufficiently.

"Daddy, Mummy says she has no money for my school fees next term and wants you to help," I said. He rubbed his eyes with a handkerchief and started lecturing me about the poor family I came from and the schools of the rich that my mother had chosen for me to complete my education.

"I understand I have a responsibility to pay your fees but you also have a responsibility to me; we both have a responsibility to each other and none of us has been doing his part," he said. "Look, I have a big garden in the village and you are now a young man. You could come with me to the village, cultivate our land and help get some money for school fees."

As soon as he finished his lecture, I asked him when he needed me to go to the village. He instructed me to come to his home on the following Saturday morning at seven. He said, "You come at eight a.m., I would have left you. In any case, you can come early and stay at my home in Bwaise on Friday so that we are on time on Saturday."

We arrived at Daddy's home village in Buikwe Mukono district at around mid-day. It was my first visit and I was afraid that I would have to stay there for the duration of the holiday, which lasted three weeks.

There were several options. I could stay at Daddy's home or I could stay with Hanifa, another stepmother, or at the home of grandparents, which I chose. Saida, another of my stepsisters, also was staying with the grandies.

In the evening Daddy showed me the land to cultivate—an acre with overgrown bushes that would have to be cleared so that

holes to slip in planters for sweet potatoes could be dug. He also promised that he would work with me on the weekends but I also had to demonstrate what I accomplished during the week. I spent most days working on the farm, returning to my grandies' home in the afternoon, helping with food preparations or washing plates. I mostly sat on a veranda with my grandfather Al Hajj Arajab Kibirige to hear stories about the generations of our clans.

Daddy also told stories when we worked on the farm, including this escape from the Buganda King's palace the day army forces loyal to Uganda's ex president Obotes stormed the compound. They crawled for more than a kilometer in fear that the moment they raised their heads they would be shot. We talked more than plowed when we were together. He would listen to my stories about school and Bukkogolwa as well as Kampala, which he matched with his tales about his schooldays. He was always number two in his class and told about how he tried to outsmart the leader in his school.

When he realized how long we had stopped working, he would then accuse me about talking too much and then we'd refocus on the plowing. At the farm, it was as if we were best friends and even now, I realized that the holiday I spent at the farm was the most significant opportunity I ever had to interact with my father. I always anticipated those weekends during the holiday. At the end of the holiday, Daddy happily gave me the school fees for the term and I continued visiting Daddy either in town or in the village. Meanwhile, my relationship with my town stepmother (Mamma Namugga) deteriorated on these visits and that ultimately affected my relationship with Daddy as well.

She knew how best to play with my Daddy's emotions as if she had taken a course dissecting the foundations of his psychology. She would always argue that I was only appearing at Daddy's home with problems surrounding school fees. She also criticized how I washed the plates, swept the compound and mopped the house, saying that my lack of work ethic was a result of being a spoiled child. So often these criticisms triggered Daddy's wrath and I found my cheeks and back stinging with repeated slaps. Perhaps any of those criticisms might have been justified, but there were also a lot of lies that she cooked up to discredit me. One day

she told Daddy how her elder son Meddie (who was about ten years younger than me) had lost one of his shoes. She suspected I had stolen the odd shoe to take it to my mother for witchcraft purposes. Daddy baldly asked me where I had taken the shoes and if indeed they were now in the hands of a witch doctor. I tried to explain that I had no intention of stealing a baby's footwear, adding that I was a faithful Muslim who believed in God, not witchcraft.

My stepmother listened from her bedroom; she caught up with Daddy in the corridors, urging him to realize that my replies disrespected and insulted him in front of the other children. "If you cannot discipline your own children yourself who do you want to do it for you?" she asked him in a confrontational tone. "For me, I don't want your spoilt children to come here and spread those bad behaviors to my children." Daddy returned with the air of a prophet sent from heaven, beat me, and demanded I leave his home for good.

I heard my father that day using language I never wished any parent would ever use on his own children. Even now as an adult and a father in my own right, I find his language utterly disturbing and in poor judgment. My stepsister Saidah, who also happened to be at home that day, apologized to me, adding that if he ever had said any of those words to her she would automatically ask him to delete her from his long list of children and she would disappear for good. I was not sure if I wanted to take Saidah's advice but I did have a burning internal urge of never returning so long as my stepmother was there.

Chapter 6

For my senior three and senior four levels at school my life was marked by a great deal of emotional stress. My mother's income had slackened so much it became an extraordinary struggle to find our school fees let alone ensure that basic household needs would be satisfied. I became a virtually obsessed sadist at school and home, worrying constantly about my future and that of my siblings. All I could do, if not in class, was to pray and try to work hard and sometimes I did wake up for night prayers.

I also read and listened a lot to the Quran tapes and started making distinctions among popular reciters much in the same way that my classmates distinguished among musicians like Jennifer Lopez and Michael Jackson at that time. My favorite reciters included Abdrahman Sudais, Saud Shuraim, both imams at the holy mosque in Mecca. There also were Imam Jabri of Riyadh, Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Matrud, Saad Al Ghamdi—among others, all names well known to the wider Islamic world. My favorite was Al Matrud, whom I first heard as I walked at the Nakasero Mosque for mid-day prayers.

He read with a slow, deliberate cadence, putting emphasis on every verse with a rhythm whose purpose seemed natural. He would read the *Surat Kahf* as if he was telling a long-cherished story. I moved to the counter, asking the vendor about him.

"Here we call him the master storyteller. When it comes to reading verses of stories, Matrud has no competitor in the whole world," he replied.

I immediately wanted to have the tape but I realized that it also cost more than the money I had allocated for the bus. I was able to bargain a discount with the vendor but it was worth it as I walked the five kilometers back to Kawempe. Eventually, I would buy other tapes with the same reciter on different *Quran surahs* and I mastered imitating the way he read when I led prayers at school. Many colleagues at school liked my reading. I also memorized other parts of the Quran listening to him.

Listening to Matrud was a profile of a calm, deeply spiritual man who recited in a slow yet strongly reassured tone. The magic of his recitation was most evident in his reading of verses with

stories. He recited with the persona of a narrator, his voice pouring forth with persuasion. To this day, I know no better Quran storyteller than Matrud, whose complete collection of tapes and digital audio recordings I have amassed. I have listened to him read virtually every single verse of the Quran. In *Surat Yousef* he continuously inflected the tone in his voice to portray the internal conflict, questioning, and tension in the story of a king's wife who tries to seduce the prophet Yousef.

I could hear from his recitation every mark of punctuation, question and exclamation in the dialogue and the prophet's ultimate flight from the temptation of sin. Yet, he even conveyed further exclamation marks as the assembled women cut their fingers at seeing the good looks of the young prophet as then the previous seducer makes her point. In my opinion, however, the best Surah from Matrud's recitation is in the *Surat Maryam*. True, there also is a touch of the presence of women in this *surah*, as all *surahs* with stories about women are beautiful.

It is in the *Surat Maryam* that Matrud unleashed his best example of narration that compels the listener through poetic rhythms. Through this recitation, one can appreciate the structure of this *surah*, arranged with more than twenty verses ending with a *YA* that then shift to end with a *DA*, accomplished without ever compromising the flow of the story. The *Surat Maryam* has been etched so deeply into my memory that even if I had not opened the Quran for ten years I still would be able to recite perfectly without missing a single word and reciting in the style of Matrud the reading master.

I wanted to be Matrud—and Uganda's Matrud but not just for the school. At school I wanted to change my name to Matrud, and all the students started calling me Sheikh Matrud but the school administration insisted I should retain the names my parents chose and, thus, they refused to register the Matrud name to my file. It didn't matter. In my class, all one had to look for was Matrud, not Kakande in order to find me.

Chapter 7

The first term in our A level had already been going for about two months when I joined the school. I had tried a month earlier to join without completing the payments and requirements for a new level but the headmaster Hajj Ibrahim Matovu intercepted me, asking to check my payment slips and inquiring about how I had managed to sneak into a class without first being cleared by the campus officials. I mumbled a few words, trying to articulate that Mummy had told me to come to school as she was going to the bank to pay this morning in order to clear my status. I hoped that this explanation would suffice even as I knew that there was no way to escape the possible lashes that awaited me.

However, he was convinced by my explanation or just confused. He said, "I see. Okay, can you go back home now and wait for your mother there. When she is done with the bank you two come together."

I had to stay at home for another month waiting for mummy to save up the funds while my colleagues studied and progressed in their schoolwork. When I arrived a month later, the students in other classes already were doing exams and, meanwhile, for the senior fives, we were to do our exams as the others left for holidays. We had just three weeks left for preparations and would use most of the time to copy notes for our exam studying.

I was still standing at the clearance area when Muyinda Asad, a friend of mine, passed by, signaling to follow him down to the washrooms. We went together past the football pitch and it was here he broke the startling news: there was another student in the senior five level who read Matrud precisely like me. My friend said that he had argued about this with Luzze Abdul Muminu, a fellow classmate, who claimed that the student recited the Quran better than me. My competition was Bakari Salman Kisozzi. Suddenly, everything was ringing like music in my ears.

"He will, of course, lead the *Isha (Night)* prayers. Just be around and listen to him," Luzze advised. Entering the classroom, my first aim was to find out who this Kisozzi was. I asked Dumba Kassim, another colleague sitting with me: "Just watch out for the smallest guy in this class struggling to be noticed, raising his hand to

answer every question or asking many questions to teachers. That guy just thinks he is the best in this class."

Dumba's description was enough for me. But it was as if he also had been patiently waiting for me. He tapped me on my shoulder, as we moved out for lunch and asked if "I was the one they called Matrud?" That very night I heard him leading the prayers, and I confessed to myself there was no reason for me also reading. I was just not a competitor, simple as that.

Being dethroned as the king of Quran reciting was just another of the setbacks that accumulated during this period. Without the Matrud voice I was nothing and there was no point continuing to imitate someone when there was someone else who surpassed my capacity to replicate the master's recitation skills. And, I decided I was not going to learn another voice. I declined subsequent requests from students to lead morning prayers in Kisozzi's absence for fear that I would become too self-conscious if our recitations were compared.

Kisozzi did not just torture me with his Quran reciting skill. When we went to an Arabic class, he appeared to be almost as skilled as the teacher. He spoke eloquent Arabic and the teacher (the late Sheikh Mutebi) often stood down to let him lead the discussion of a text chapter. Students who were one year ahead in senior six called on Kisozzi to help them with their Arabic skills. He effectively had become a non-paid Arabic teacher for his classmates as well as those senior to him.

We did the exams and when the results came, despite my being late at school I did well enough to be in the third place of the class, just behind two class repeaters (who had attended the senior five level in the previous year). For the senior five beginners, I was ranked as the best. The school headmaster always read the list of the ten best students at the term's first-week parade and publicly congratulated the students. Kisozzi was ranked seventh and, for me, being ahead of him in the class ranking gave hope and motivation. We had already started being fierce rivals in class at the mosque. He bested me in Arabic, as he would get a mark of 99 percent in all three papers while I managed scores in the seventies and eighties but we both received an A grade. Then I would dwarf

him in all of the remaining subjects, keeping him at bay and behind when all of the exam results were totaled.

Kisozzi declared his intention to stand for the school's head boy position but my support went to his rival Matovu Hassan, who came to my bedside one night to tell me that he was standing for the position only to ensure that Kisozzi did not succeed.

"The short boy [Kisozzi] had already exhibited his disrespect to everyone including his classmates and good sheikhs like you," Matovu said, adding that he needed my support and my influence as a religious figure and as an old boy in the school. Matovu only recently had arrived at the school, joining us in the senior five level class. The two of us canvassed the dormitories and we had enough votes to lock out Kisozzi.

Of course, Matovu, like all politicians, forgot to express his gratitude after the victory. The postscript was that the administration, concerned that they might lose Kisozzi among school prefects, named him to be chairman of the Kawempe Muslim Students Association (KAMSA), a position that I thought was securely within my hands. The school administration tried to offer another position in the school but I declined. My rivalry with Kisozzi extended to other arenas such as class debates and discussions. Whenever I discussed a paper, he never failed to stand up and oppose my positions, calling me *Braba* (brother) while in the same breath proclaiming that my reasoning was faulty. Naturally, I reciprocated, calling him *Braba* as well and deconstructing his arguments point by point. We came to be known at the school as *The Brabas*.

Kisozzi also won all the Quran competitions at school, even when I participated. One event was a three-day Muslim students leaders' seminar held at the nearby Kakiri Islamic primary school, where we had participated in many Quran competitions over the year. On the day of the competition, Kisozzi, not the seminar imam, grabbed the microphone to lead the morning prayers and he read *Surat Yousef* in classic Matrud style, slowing his cadence to stress the contemplative emphasis in the chapters where the woman attempted to seduce the prophet Yousef. After prayers, the audience commended him enthusiastically for his recitation skills.

His strong performance triggered quite a bit of panic especially among contestants in the evening competition. Munir Nsereko, a winner in the previous year, had been pegged as the favorite Quran reciter. He also recited in the Matrud style and had recently braced himself with memorizing the whole Quran at the Bugembe Islamic Institute, one of the best Quran schools in the country. Munir's name was well known so we anticipated that the spectators that evening were going to be treated to an intensely competitive presentation.

Munir was a personal friend because we were not only distantly related but also because we both subscribed to the Matrud recitation as the best approach and we strived to perfect it. I always called him my "Local Matrud" and he taught me a lot about the *Ahkam Tajjiudi* (Quran recitation rules), a field that had created some difficulties for me, mainly because much of my studies was conducted in mostly secular schools.

I met Munir in the dormitory, whose bed was just a few places away from mine.

"Did you pray the morning prayer in congregation?" I asked.

"Why?" Munir responded.

"Because of Kisozzi leading the prayer, he answered in a question format."

"Of course."

"What do you say about his reading?"

"He reads well," Munir said. "For me at this stage I could find some mistakes in his reading like every person is not perfect but his recitation of *Surat Yousef* in the morning was excellent."

Excellent was a word I least expected to hear from my "Local Matrud."

However, it had been said loud and clear.

"That boy is good," I said. "Do you fear you have a rival in today's competition?" I asked.

"Look, Yasin," he said in a humble tone. "It's not just about today's competition but about reading well the book of God. Today there are seven contenders. You have not heard from others so you cannot put me or Kisozzi at the top."

At mid-day prayers I asked *Braba* about his preparations, telling him I looked forward to seeing him do his best as he was

representing our school. He replied, "I have never been number two in any Quran competitions. I would not go for any competition I doubted my winning so be firm, *Braba* Kakande."

I was not firm, so I asked again, "Do you know about Munir?"

"Yes, of course. Who doesn't know him here," he answered.

"Have you heard him reading before," I asked again.

"Many times, no worries, *Braba* Kakande. I understand your fears but have trust in me. He reads only Matrud style and I can read about six styles, all perfectly."

At the competition in the evening, Kisozzi was the fifth to read, immediately after Munir. The applause for Munir, as usual, was evident but to no one's surprise. As Kisozzi reached the podium, he read in a very strange voice, to the surprise of everyone in the room. Many thought he was trying to imitate Ali Jabri's style but even I thought that there was nothing similar to the recitation style of Ali Jabri, the late Riyadh-based imam. Munir sat behind me and I stretched back to have a word.

"What you think?" I asked.

"He is the worst so far," he replied.

After the other two remaining readers finished, the results were announced from starting with last place (seventh). Kisozzi's name was read first and Munir's last. Munir won for the third time. I believed that Munir's performance had so unsettled Kisozzi that he risked the competition by showing that he could do another voice, obviously not as well practiced as Matrud's.

Chapter 8

The competition only reinforced everybody's resolve at the beginning of the first term in the senior six level. There was a lot of pressure from teachers for us to keep the Kawempe name at the top. The school was one of the best in the country presenting the best candidates, as listed in the national newspaper. During the previous year, four out of the five best students named came from Kawempe.

I had some troubles with school fees, as I had not yet cleared the debts from the previous year but fortunately the headmaster allowed me to resume studying. Every two weeks they would send me back for school fees with other defaulters and I would return with any amount Mummy could have raised from her work at the clinic. The challenge that year was Mayi was completing her third year at university, Faridah was in her final year in nursing, and I was a candidate at my school. One point, Mamma rushed to Bukkogolwa to convince her Mother (Museebeyi) and, she sold her cow to raise Mayi's fees for exams. None of my maternal uncles approved and they insisted that we be sent back to our father and stop burdening their sister because we were not orphans. Happily, the stressful relationships abated over the years and today I am best friends with a particular uncle who was among the most vocal in this situation. Wahab's father at the time could clear Wahab's primary school fees, though most often Mummy diverted them to me or Mayi, as we were in more critical straits. The three of us completely understood their concerns but we had no choice. Their sister was our mother, the only one we had.

Meanwhile, school discussions took on a new head of steam, and every imaginable topic had its day to be aired among us. The weekends became especially rigorous in academic demands where we had European history seminars that required us to discuss and argue questions in the presence of our teacher. Occasionally, the senior fives students would attend and then every student present would make the most serious arguments in their best appearance and matter in order to attract the attention of the younger female students.

One day, I had to prepare a presentation about Metternich so I hurried after class back to the dormitory to take a shower, exchange my uniform for smart-looking dress clothes, and borrowed cologne from my neighbor Bamujje Ahmed. After going to great lengths to make my appearance as spiffy as possible, I found out that the senior five students were not going to attend the seminar that day. The entire class lapsed into laughter, half-jokingly accusing me of sabotaging the presentation plans. Others were kinder, encouraging me to wear the same outfit the next time.

Our European history teacher Mr. Kitooke was one of the best in the school, rigorously critical and argumentative as his subject required. It was his first appearance at the seminar, and I knew he would, of course, criticize my research, no matter how good it would be. One person discussed his question prior to my presentation and it was criticized as one would have expected. I had read several books on Metternich and had an introduction with some English vocabulary words that I could barely managed to pronounce with any accuracy. I still can remember part of my introduction: "In the annals of European history no statesman was a vanguard of old European class aristocracy as Von Metternich . . ." With those words, the class broke out into raucous laughter, including the teacher.

Unfortunately, after my presentation when Mr. Kitooke took to the podium, he immediately declared me to have misinterpreted the aim of the question. He explained how it was not necessary for me to use hard words, including those difficult to pronounce clearly. He tested me by asking for the definitions of a few words I had used, but if he thought there was any single word I didn't know, he also was guilty of underestimating the challenge here. I had researched every single word, as I knew that critics like Kisozzi in class would be immediately eager to embarrass me in front of the younger senior fives students. The approach I had taken admittedly was wrong. But I was sure that any discussant on Sunday would take the same approach, so I listened carefully and corrected myself. When it was over, I was happy the young senior fives had not attended the discussion to witness this embarrassment.

On Sunday we traveled to the Nabisunsa girls' school for the seminar, where students and teachers from the major schools

around the country were invited. The seminar clearly was an opportunity for each institution to showcase its brightest protégés. My Metternich question had been discussed by discussant from a popular school in Kampala, so I had my hand up as soon as he finished. I humbly declared to him that he had erred in answering the question. I went through the approach Mr. Kitooke had articulated the day before and as I finished it was evident I had won the day. "The small boy who was here was an intellectual," Mr. Ssali, the history teacher at Nabisunsa, said. Tanga Oddoyi, one of the most popular history teachers in the country also said, "I can see Kawempe students can make good lawyers."

My reputation had been solidified from that point on and from then until the end of the seminar I was a sought-after intellectual consultant. I had many Nabisunsa girls coming to talk to me, asking me about other history question approaches. Going further, the Kawempe guys waited for me in the school truck in the evening to add more names from those Tanga and Ssali already had given me. As the truck started, Bamujje was the first to announce how some people had forgotten they came with friends and spent all their time with girls. "Unfortunately one of those people is a sheikh but from now onwards we shall call him *dominant*," he said.

Kisozzi was also on the truck, and he retorted that he was a senior sheikh, and that he was stripping some sheikhs of their titles as they had to make *Ghusul*, a term which represented the major Islamic bath one takes after sexual intercourse.

At the end of our second term mock interim results were returned and I was at the top of my class with all A grades except for a C in economics, a subject that continued to confound me. My general paper marks also could have been better, especially in mathematical logic. The results of our marks were pinned on the notice board at school and students from the senior one level crammed into bunches at the board trying to see who were the big brains in the school. When I moved ahead to the notice board, I overheard some O level girls expressing their sympathies about some Yasin guy who was poor in GP (general paper) and was likely to miss becoming a national candidate because of his poor English. One girl told her friend that senior six level girls said Yasin was a sheikh who knew mostly Arabic but was

not good in English. None of them seemed to be aware that the Yasin they spoke about was among them so I casually introduced myself as the Yasin they were chatting about in front of the notice board. They immediately covered their faces and sprinted back to their dormitories.

Matovu Ibrahim, the school headmaster, told the deputy that they were not to send me back for any delinquent school fees that third term. He wanted me to concentrate on excelling in my studies, improve my economics and English, and only when I was done with exams would I go and help Mummy to satisfy the school fee arrears.

Chapter 9

After the exams I moved to the village to start looking for a teaching placement. I planned on visiting most of the schools during the vacation to secure a placement for teaching in the coming term. The nearest schools near Bukkogolwa were Kayejje and Abu Aisha SS in Bugoye, as they both promised me a job once the term began. I also wanted to visit Sayyidina Abubaker SS in Kabasanda, which was about fourteen kilometers from Bukkogolwa and Lukalu S.S., which was about a trip of twenty kilometers. Because I was broke and hardly had any transport money I planned to stay with a relative in the town of Kibibi, which was about six kilometers from home and shortened my walking distance considerably.

It was a Monday at around five in the morning when I embarked on a long trek from Kibibi to Kabasanda. I arrived at the school at around eight and waited for the headmaster to arrive, which he did at nine and we shared tea as we talked. It so happened that he was a distant relative but I also was trying my best to make our relationship closer even though we had never met previously. He also promised I should check with him in about two weeks time when candidates returned to classes after the holiday.

My second journey on foot was to Lukalu S.S. and this one happened to be longer than I had even expected. The day's temperatures had risen considerably and the dust in the roads was stirred up by the heavy traffic. I also had walked three hours earlier in the day. My energy sagged quite a bit, and I took three rest breaks under some shade to regroup.

As I walked, Mr. Lukyamuzi, an old teacher from Kawempe, passed me in his car and he already had passed a distance of a few meters when he suddenly reversed and called me by my two names. He was going to Kibibi SS, another school where he was teaching. Mr. Lukyamuzi was a history and Islamic teacher, one of the most popular at Kawempe of our times because of his straightforward open-minded rhetoric. He could say everything in class without hesitation or fear of offending anyone. Many students joked about him that if he ever found someone defecating on a road, he would just sit and pretend that the person was

on another business or otherwise the unfortunate individual then would be exposed the next day to the entire school.

Panic ran throughout my body and aggravated my sweating, which was becoming aggravated on its own thanks to the hot dusty conditions. I was, of course, not going to tell him the distance I had walked. He asked about the purpose of my walk in a low-voice tone that obviously sounded sympathetic, which seemed a bit unexpected from him. I indicated that I had only walked a short distance, as I pointed behind and mentioned that I was visiting an aunt who was just a few meters away.

Mr. Lukyamuzi, however, could never be fooled. "I am not going to take those lies from you," he replied. "Look at yourself, with all that dust you tell me you are coming from near there. Is Kabasanda a near distance for you? I think you are not even from Kabasanda. Maybe you walked from Gombe and you are going to Kampala. Tell me. I can help you."

Despite being found out, I resisted telling him anything to confirm his suspicions. Otherwise, he would tell the whole upcoming senior six class about my story once the term begun and I would never then get a simple gesture or sign of respect whenever I visited the school. This time I just shook my head without saying a word. He reached his pocket and pulled 5,000 shillings (which was the equivalent to $2.30 in U.S. currency) and gave it to me and he drove away. I appreciated the unexpected money gift and I tucked it away as Lukalu was very close by. I immediately moved to the school mosque, took a shower there and looked at my shirts, which were beyond repair but I had to put them on again. Before going to headmaster's office, I completed the mid-day prayer with others. Afterward, I took a taxi back to Kibibi.

I started teaching at both Sayyidina Abubaker SS in Kabasanda and Kayejje SS in Gombe. I rented a one room in Kibibi SS just in the middle between the two locations. One day, a colleague teacher came to my class in Kayejje and told me the senior six level results were out and Kawempe had three students in the top five. I asked if he had heard my name, to which he replied in the negative. I rushed to Gombe SS where I met the teachers and one told me that he had heard the best student in Kawempe

was from Kibibi. He had triggered my intense curiosity but no one knew their names.

I rushed to Kibibi to where our former deputy headmaster had been appointed as the school's headmaster, knowing that he could confirm the results. He said the best student was a son of one of the Kibibi sheikhs. I had all A grades except for one B, which the other two best Kawempe students had. The difference, though, was the distinction in general paper, which was my weakest area. He reassured me partially by congratulating me on my achievements and he added that I could do any course I wanted on government sponsorship at Makerere but I thought I didn't deserve the accolades. I had been at the top of my class in mock exams and now three people from that very class were among the country's best five and I was not among them. He noticed my deep disappointment and again tried to reassure me that God offers great promise for me in the future. I asked what my formidable rival Kisozzi earned and he told me that he had two B grades. That was the best consolation for me.

When I visited the school to see my results, Hajji Matovu sent a student to summon me while I was at the notice board. He was not congratulating me but instead demanding that I clear all my school arrears in order to have my slips ready for registration at campus. I had been paying one of my two salaries directly to the school but even after five months of teaching I had yet to clear 50 percent of the arrears.

The last week before starting campus was when I satisfied in full the arrears but now I had no money to shop for my campus needs. Mummy's clinic business had now collapsed completely and she had relocated from Kawempe Mbogo to Kagoma, an inside suburb of Kampala to be close to her new job as a school nurse. The first day at campus I had to borrow a meal card from someone who was not using it, as it was essential to pay the registration fee to obtain my meal card. The next day I went to one of my paternal aunties and asked for 8,000 shillings (equal to $10 in U.S.) to cover my registration fees and obtain my meal card.

Chapter 10

Finally, in October of 2001, I was able to start my university studies in mass communication. My roommates included an OB Mohammed Ssebyala; Michael Tushabe, a Rwandan student, Ogwang, Dennis, and Simon. In Uganda, OB means "Old Boy" and, of course, OG means "Old Girl." Michael Tushabe was the Rwandan student, while Ogwang was Ugandan. The first week—which was the fresher orientation—was full of partying but I spent most of it in Kabasanda, winding up my teaching duties and demanding my pay. Only in the second week was I able to gain the full experience of orientation, settling in with my roommates, students in my program of study, and getting around on campus.

One of the biggest early challenges was roommate relationships and protocol. One evening at eleven, Michael returned to the dormitory with a girlfriend and both were definitely drunk but that didn't stop them from goading Ogwang into preparing another round of cocktails. As he delivered the drinks, Ogwang asked each us to leave our quarters briefly to give Michael some privacy so we headed out to the university gardens where other students were mingling. I learned that evening a term I would hear and experience repeatedly during the three years at campus—benched, which was the act of being sent out of a room to allow a roommate to enjoy the company of his young female companion.

At about one a.m., Ogwang expressed his shock that Michael had not yet consummated the deal, so to speak. He peeked in on the couple in the room but they were so drunk that they forgot to lock the door and he imagined that they had passed out from the alcohol. Determined, a tired Ogwang said he was going back to the room, and encouraged the rest of us to follow suit.

However, I protested at the thought of returning to sleep in a room where a roommate had a girl in his bed. Meddie just waved good-bye to us and went to find an open bed at the home of some friends who lived outside the university. Simon joined me in protesting against returning to the room, and asked Ogwang to wake the drunken pair and urge them to pack and leave for a cheap lodge elsewhere. Ogwang replied that asking people to leave was the last thing on his mind, adding that he had so many OBs in the

university and that if any of us was the only student representative our schools had sent to the university he was sorry. And, then he went to find an OB who would let him sleep at the residence for the night. I told Simon we could sleep in Hood Kabunga's room, another OB from Kawempe who also resided in University Hall. I would ask one of Hood's roommates to let us share a bed and I would myself share one with Hood.

The next day, as we all assembled for lunch in the room, we waged a big debate about Michael's actions, demanding that he should never bench anyone of us again. Naturally, a week later, Michael was at it again, as we were all in the room when he chatted up a girl on the phone and asked her to come to our room. Ogwang was the first to rule out leaving the room if Michael was inviting another girl. Michael retorted that he had no intentions of sending any one of us out of the room, and anyone who wanted to stay could do so because he planned on giving the woman enough alcohol to not be concerned about anyone else remaining in the room. I protested vigorously and rushed downstairs to call Meddie on a call box, as I didn't have a phone at the time. I knew that Meddie would reinforce my stance to prevent this woman from being put into a vulnerable and potentially demeaning position. Meanwhile, Simon was quiet and I couldn't tell if he was supporting my position. The girl arrived soon after and Ogwang, as usual, acted as the collect boy, picking the drinks from the campus canteen. I waited for about an hour while Michael regaled his female visitor with drinks and Ogwang joined their conversations, Meddie had yet to arrive while Simon sheepishly had already covered himself in his blanket, a sure signal that he was not planning to leave. Resigned, I left the room and headed to Hood's place.

In the aftermath, I tried once again to resolve what appeared to be a predicament that might be occurring every single night. Our court sat at lunch, as I had appointed myself the judge. I asked all of the involved roommates to attend, and as soon as I launched into the topic, Ogwang burst into laughter.

"If you Muslims are against enjoying women just join your brother Osama in the Tora Bora Mountains and live with snakes."

The comment was unwelcome but the whole room joined Ogwang in laughter while I sought refuge from this mocking scene.

Ogwang continued, "And, we are going to draw up a timetable of bringing girls in this room. If, Michael, you bring today; the next day I will bring and, Simon, I saw your head moving out of your bracket at night to peep, so you also have to bring girls in this room and don't cheat on us."

Having said his piece, Ogwang picked up his lunch dishes and left. Simon then spoke.

"Forget it, guys, that Ogwang is mad. I never raised my head at night; even my ears were closed with cotton," Simon said in a manner that seemed more joking than serious. "I am sorry, guys. I think what we're doing is bad but as for me, you know, I have no OBs here, so I have no alternatives but to stay inside here."

Despite Ogwang's threats he never brought a single girl in the room during the year we stayed together. As expected, Michael was the only roommate who continually benched us.

Chapter 11

In the second year, we had graduated to the amenities of having just two persons to a room and being able to select whom we wanted. My choice was Kiryowa Harouna, a fourth-year student of dental surgery and a village mate from Kawempe. His elder sister had worked with my mother at one hospital and his family was close to my mother's family. We had all the right reasons to stay together.

We were eight mass communication students from the Kawempe Muslim Secondary School. Only Ssebyala shared with me the same hall of residency, while the others were distributed among other halls with the names of Livingstone, Mitchell, Nsibirwa, and Lumumba. We had just one girl—Babirye who stayed in Mary Stuart.

All students from the Muslim schools—Kibuli Secondary School, Gombe Secondary School, Mbogo High, and Nabisunsa Girls—were like brothers and sisters at the university. The boys sat in the most distant corner during lectures, a safe buffer to make noise and dodge answering the teacher's questions. John Matovu, one of the lecturers who taught broadcasting, was surprised while reading the class roster to find that all of the students with Muslim names congregated in the same corner. He named our group "the Baghdad corner," which stayed with us for the three years even when we started interacting with many other students.

In our first year we only did general courses—introduction to writing, introduction to broadcasting, introduction to public relations, and others. It was in the second year that one had to decide whether to be a broadcaster, print journalist, or a public relations professional. One could major in one field and minor in another. For the first time I was spoiled for the choice, and everyone had different perspectives. Even my old friend Ismael wanted to do broadcasting and I thought about public relations or print. Ismael argued with me to consider how many newspapers were in the country. There were only two dailies at the time: *The New Vision* and *The Daily Monitor*. There also was a Luganda tabloid called *Bukedde*.

Ismael had a point about the limited number of competitors. I had a chat with the news writing lecturer (Bernard Tabaire) as we left class one evening. He dismissed my fears of an inadequate job supply and said more papers were launching in the market. And, that year, the *Red Pepper* tabloid was launched. He also said that specializing in print meant polishing my writing skills and one could work better in all other fields with good writing skills.

I was convinced so completely that I decided to skip a minor in public relations. Most of the "Baghdad" circle majored in broadcasting like Ismael. My first challenge in my major subjects was to find a placement for an internship. The rule was one had to apply to either *Monitor* or *New Vision* but not both. I applied to *The New Vision* and only three internees were taken, and I was not among them. I immediately panicked to find another internship placement elsewhere and with *The Monitor* also having announced its successful candidates the only option was now to go for an internship in public relations. The Islamic University in Uganda at Kibuli offered me a place.

However, I still was not done with my adventures with print, as I opted to do my research critiquing *The Daily Monitor's* coverage of Islam. My topic title became: "The Negative Portrayal of Islam in the Print Media: A Case Study of *The Monitor* Newspaper." I spent most of my time in the library and on the newspaper's web site searching for stories on Islam. I came across several stories on Islamic terrorism and oppression of women with distorted facts such as only women adulterers were to be stoned to death.

I tallied figures of stories on Islam that appeared in the paper and concluded that most stories were negative. My supervisor believed that I had a future as a journalist who could help the positive side of Islam emerge in media coverage. When we met before the final submission, he clarified his position indicating that the problem was not actually with the journalists who wrote the articles as I had pointed out in my thesis but instead with Muslims themselves. Muslims were not willing to defend their faith in the press.

He explained that he knew quite a number of good Muslim journalists who never bothered to write anything about Islam. Tayebwa was also an editor at *The Monitor* when he supervised my

thesis. I told him what I believed was right—that a good piece on Islam would never find any placement in their paper.

He asked me if I had ever written any response on the articles I had quoted and if it had failed to appear in the paper but I had never bothered to do such a thing. I just believed it. He told me to try once and see what would happen. A year later after my university work, I was to spot yet another opinion article in the paper that supported the bombing of Muslims everywhere to neutralize their terrorist aspirations. This was 2005 when Israel was bombing Palestine.

I thought the piece was heartless. I was in Canada attending a global AIDS conference at the time and I had witnessed several anti-war demonstrations among the Canadians. I decided to write back a piece to *The Monitor* as a response to the article. It was published a week later with a headline: "Why Justify the Murder of Muslims."

* * *

During our first year at Makerere University, I looked forward to the Muslim student association's freshers' Quran competitions. After seeing Kisozzi losing to everyone at Kakiri, I thought now was the time for our head-to-head challenge. After registering as one of twenty-four competitors, I spent most of the following two weeks listening to Matrud and practicing *Surat Al Mujadillah* which I would recite during the competition. I purchased a new cassette recorder so I could compare my recitation style to Matrud. I also visited some of the best sheikhs who could advise me on Tajiuid, and offer suggestions for improving my recitation. One of those most helpful mentors was Sheikh Mohamoud, a Quran teacher at the Bilal primary school in Bwaise. He listened and indicated the spots in my recitation where lapses in style needed to be corrected. His patience was a gift as he agreed to listen to me for three more days before the competition, where he said I would most certainly be crowned the winner. However, he didn't know that I really was after winning against just one person.

On the day for the competition, I bought sweet banana and honey to help soften my vocal tones, and I recorded my recitation, satisfied that it was nearly perfectly identical to Matrud's reading of this particular *surah*, I thought Kisozzi would again change the stylistic manner of his recitation, which would understandably give me the edge in the competition, but he didn't. During my reading, the judges asked two questions of me to explain the rulings of *Tajiuid* on some of the verses that I recited. Unfortunately, I only answered one of the questions correctly. Kisozzi was named the top reciter and I came in ninth, an outcome that so embarrassed me that I considered fleeing abruptly from the mosque.

Yet, the sheikh who had so graciously offered his time to mentor me for the recitation met me at the ablutions area of the mosque. I told him that I didn't think I read as well as he had indicated. He said, "Look, Yasin, I didn't know the kind of people you were going to compete with. Those boys all have studied Quran from their primary school to secondary school and many are still studying. Even in Quran popular schools like Bugembe and Bilal they would win such a competition. You studied in a secular school at both the primary and secondary levels, and being among the best ten is excellent."

During my last semester at Makerere, Saida, my stepsister who was teaching in a primary school in Masaka, called me about her plans to upgrade her studies. She had given all of her documents to Sophia who agreed to submit them to the school on her behalf. Unfortunately, Sophia had either been too busy or careless, so Saida asked me to submit her application documents for her. I accepted and she gave me the phone number for Sophia, who was staying in Kamwokya just a few kilometers from the university.

I spent about thirty minutes trying to find the shop where Sophia waited for me, and she had given the description of the shop in Kamwokya and the clothes she was wearing but for no apparent reason, we could not locate each other. I had never met her before, as my four elder sisters—Sarah Nakitto, Sauya, Sophia, and Saida—had grown up in Masaka with their mother Joyce as the three of us had stayed with our mother. We caught glimpses of each other when we visited our father but even those instances would have been so rare and distant that it would have been

difficult to spot each other immediately in public. I last had seen Sophia with Sarah when I was about twelve years old and still in primary school. Even today, I am unable to describe Sarah, with whom my only substantial contact has been a few phone calls. At the time of the birth of our first daughter, my wife chose a religious name for her and I selected a surname and the only name I could think of was Sarah's—Nakitto.

When we finally found each other and walked back to her rented house, Sophia immediately accused me of neglecting them, adding that a man of honor and position would not ignore my sisters as my father had done with his daughters. She contended that it was my obligation to look out for them because I was a man but not the other way round. At her home, she served me Coke and cake, while spending yet another thirty minutes lecturing me about my father who had fathered thirteen of us from different mothers and who finally had decided to consider only one mother's children as his bona fide children.

She blamed our father—as well as her stepmother Nassuna and the Islam religion for engendering disunity and suffering by taking up the practices of polygamy. Sophia had converted to Christianity, her mother's religion, and joined a Born-Again evangelical sect. She dismissed family members who had criticized her conversion, arguing that, as an adult, she had every basic right to decide the religion of her choice. Based on her mother's upbringing and education, she was convinced that she was on the right track.

"You teach your children what you want them to be," she said. "And if you leave them to other people to teach them on your behalf they will teach them what they want them to be."

I thought she was a bit too vengeful but, mindful of keeping the polite decency of being a visitor in someone's home, I kept my opinions to myself, even as they were percolating actively inside me like a dormant volcano stirring for an eventual eruption. She told me how she wanted the details of her death to be strictly handled according to the practices of her new religion and she cautioned me never to carry on practices of Islam such as polygamy. At the end of our discussion, she finally gave me the documents I had come to collect and we parted promising to return one other day but regrettably I never did.

THE ROAD MAP TO DUBAI

Chapter 12

The halcyon days of university with plenty of free food and accommodations had finally come to an end. After my university exams I had no clear idea about how my working life would begin. Mostly desperate to find a job which would pay enough for me to be self-sufficient, I already had spent my three years of university teaching in villages on weekends but the income provided much-welcomed pocket money but certainly not enough to sustain a life with all of the essentials. Moreover most times I never was even paid but there always was free food at the university.

Now the only chance left to me was the recess term days that I spent at the university checking job adverts and applying to whatever job that caught my eye. One was for Arabic monitoring with the BBC in Nairobi. I clarified in my application that I was not an Arabic native speaker but had become fluent in the language during my secondary school days. I indicated that I was one of the first students in Makerere University's department of Arabic language studies. The positioning worked as I was short listed and was called for an interview but, unfortunately, it did not go well. However, the interview made a significant impression upon my mind to believe that I would do best to find a thriving, financially productive job outside Uganda. I went to Dar es Salaam, where I stayed with a university friend's family for a month as I again distributed CVs, visited plenty of companies, offering to talk about my credentials and what I could do to enhance the company's communication programs. Yet, with no experience to augment my claims, I found no believers so I returned to Uganda to teach college-level courses in journalism. I rented a one-room house in Namasumba, a suburb of Kampala. Restless, I decided to go for what I believed to be the biggest potential prize for boosting my career and researched my options in Dubai. I had to sell the plan well to Mamma so that she could mobilize some money for me to obtain a visa and air ticket. I told my mother there was a job that just needed me to turn up physically in the country and take it.

I researched several tourism-based companies, focusing on a particular firm operated by Hajji Isaac Ssaka, a college graduate

from the United Arab Emirates who had completed Islamic studies. A friend said he was the only trustworthy man, and he apparently needed just three million shillings (US$2,000) to process my visa and air ticket.

Mummy was then working as a school nurse at a relative's school, called Hajji Mohammed Maseruka. She approached her employer for a loan, which would be repaid through garnishments from her salary. However, the loan did not cover the travel expenses so she also approached some financial companies to borrow the balance.

My sister Farida was also to contribute funds by selling a set of chairs and a television. I also received some money from a former school friend who was in London at the time. I was still short about 500,000 shillings—or $400 less than the total needed. I approached Ssaka, explaining this was all I could muster. He read several verses in the Quran to me about cheating, making me swear with the book of Allah that I was going to satisfy the balance once I arrived in Dubai. He took the money and the papers necessary to obtain a visa, which would take a week to process.

I told my friend who had recommended Ssaka that I already had paid and he asked me if I had asked for receipts in return. I was suddenly struck by the predicament, pleading in excuse that how could I even think of asking for a receipt when I had literally begged for him to accept only part of the total payments. My friend urged me to return to Ssaka the following day and ask for receipts, which I did. The advice was well chosen because the following day, Ssaka asked his secretary to write up two receipts; one for the visa and another for the air tickets, which also indicated the outstanding balance. Little did I know that I even needed to be yet more cautious. A week later, in the morning, I returned to Ssaka's office hoping that my visa was ready. It wasn't but he asked me to return in the afternoon, when I found my visa on his table. Excited, I let my friends know that I had obtained my visa for Dubai but one of Ssaka's friends, Sheikh Saad, who also was a UAE graduate, immediately detected that the visa was fake.

He pointed out numerous inconsistencies on the document and mentioned that another man had taken a copy of that visa

earlier in the day with only the issued name different on it. Saad cursed his friend for being such a bold cheater to not even spare a poor individual who desperately tried to raise the funds from so many different sources. It was hard to discern who really was being sincere because many people would be envious of a fellow Ugandan who had a chance to land a job and live in one of the most financially desirable places in the world. I ended up doubting Saad's claim. I was sure the visa was in true, legal form.

I was nervous as it was just three days before my scheduled departure. Ssaka asked me to come the following day so we could purchase the air ticket. However, he was too busy that day and then postponed yet another day. On my scheduled departure date, he apparently had booked an airline ticket for me. Meanwhile, my family was excited as they prepared a farewell meal for me along with plenty of Mamma's friends who would be there to offer their own best wishes. My sisters called on a friend's phone as I did not have one at the time. As they congratulated me, they also reminded me to remain faithful to Mamma and to repay the debts she incurred as a result of my big move. I became apprehensive about Ssaka's genuine intentions but I hesitated to tell others at home. I went to his office at eight a.m. before he opened, he met me, frowned and told me to return at mid-day as he was having an appointment with a British consul. I stayed near the building, bumping into Sheikh Saad again who asked if I was still chasing Ssaka's alleged air ticket with a fake visa.

I could not muster an answer, starting to feel mortally embarrassed and deeply ashamed to the point of breaking down in sobs. I managed a look that indicated to my friend, "please help me now" but he didn't understand and left without incident. Shortly before mid-day I was back at Ssaka's office and we went together to the Emirates Airlines. He talked to the customer relations lady, returning to tell me that there was a mistake in my visa. It had indicated my status as a business professional but I had a student passport. By now I had already noticed that the visa also got my date of birth wrong. Likewise, the date of passport issue also was wrong—precisely the type of inconsistencies that Sheikh Saad had pointed out to me earlier.

Ssaka assured me that he would fix the visa problem and that he would rebook another flight for me. He told me to return in the following week. Now, I was stranded at the airline offices, temporarily lost about what to do next. I quickly mustered the courage to call a neighbor and asked him to let me speak to Mamma if she was near. I told her the flight was cancelled, and I mentioned that the prospects were gloomy because I suspected that this man had cheated us out of the money. She responded with just, "Umm," and I thought she was trying to suppress her tears.

Chapter 13

For the next three months I regularly camped out at Ssaka's office either to seek repayment or to obtain my true visa. The routine became painfully familiar. Every Monday, he would tell me to wait until Wednesday, when he would instruct me to come back a day later and then when the weekend came, he said for me to come back on the next Monday. He did this for about a month and, in evident frustration, I decided to seek some assistance from some security men.

I had a former classmate working at the CPS, and in Uganda one always manages to have someone working in police upon one's behalf. I told my classmate everything about what had happened in my interactions with Ssaka in the hopes that he would move to arrest him for criminal fraud. However, the case was abruptly stopped when a police supervisor interceded. Apparently, it was not his boss that was Ssaka's friend but the supervisor had known Ssaka from previous cases. He told me it was pointless to bring him in custody as he would be free within an hour. Obviously, Ssaka was well connected at police headquarters like all other cheaters or criminals who pulled similar scams. The police supervisor said the best thing to do was to beg him politely in hopes that he would have a change of heart and return the money. At least, he offered to call Ssaka, asking him to pay me back.

With the police option set aside, I decided that perhaps some political tactics might lead to results. My first target was Al Hajji Moses Kigongo, who was vice chair of the National Resistance Movement ruling party. He was a close friend of one of my grandfathers who was a brother to Sheikh Hood, Hajji Yousef Lunuma who had just passed away a few weeks. When I went to Hajj Kigongo's office, he was not in but I introduced myself to his personal assistant who had once been an MP and was an active politician. He assured me that I would not need Hajj Kigongo to interfere. The assistant said he would just give the man a call, tell him where his office was, and the money would be returned in just hours. He immediately recognized Ssaka's name as he made the call. He put me on the line and Ssaka's tone had moderated

considerably as he pledged that I would have my money back within a week.

Hopeful that the situation had been resolved to my satisfaction, I left the personal assistant's office and ran into a Muslim leader whom I had previously briefed about my troubles with Ssaka. Once again, my naiveté got the better of me as I learned that Ssaka and the personal assistant were cousins.

It seemed that every security operative knew Ssaka and no one was willing to help me. Those who said they could help wanted money and a lot of it. Meanwhile, I learned that a group of seven people Ssaka had arranged to travel to Germany was arrested in Nairobi because of fake documents, I was astonished at the news. The victims' families, like me, regularly visited his office to see how he could help. Their tactics were familiar as well. Unsatisfied at Ssaka's unwillingness to make good on his fraudulent practices, they also tried security operatives they plied with bribes but, alas, they, too, had no results for their money and efforts. No one was more connected to the official apparatus than Ssaka.

As I continued to fumble about for a solution, one person who knew Ssaka well told me of a certain Hajj in Wembley's security operation that had once brought Ssaka to his knees. Apparently, the man (Uthuman) was the one who could get results. While I was tempted, I decided to try a different tactic so I called Ssaka, masking my voice and introducing myself as Hajj Uthuman. I told Ssaka that news had spread that he had returned to stealing innocent people's money and that I would be on his doorstep immediately if he didn't clear Yasin Kakande in two days.

The tactic worked to my surprise or at least I thought it did. The next day at his office, Ssaka had 1 million shillings for me and wondered why I contacted Hajj Uthuman. He promised the balance in three days but I should have anticipated that Ssaka was too cagey to believe he would be transformed by just a simple phone call. I returned three days later to Ssaka, who now furiously accused me of being no better than a thief. Now he was threatening me that Hajji Uthuman was looking for me because he needed to get his share of payment.

I immediately deposited some of the money to Mamma's employer as a payment for the school loan and used the rest to go

to Mombasa in hopes I would find a job there. I had given up on the idea of finding employment in Uganda. A friend in Mombasa was surprised that I could be cheated on such a simple thing as a Dubai visa. He talked to his aunt, who operated a tourism company and she easily arranged a visa to Dubai. She hesitated initially but my friend asked her to hold him fully responsible in any case I was lost. With triumph, I returned to Uganda with my Dubai visa in hand and my mother's employer Hajji Maseruka returned the school loan money I had deposited. As a bonus, I was able to buy an air ticket at just $500.

Chapter 14

I arrived at Dubai International Airport on May 19, 2005 with only $58 in hand and when I exchanged it for local *dirhams*, it came to a total of 180. I hoped to have one of my Ugandan friends, who were colleagues from school, willing to pick me up but the apparently had switched off their phones. I spent my first night in Dubai at the bus station, and left briefly in the morning for prayers before returning to the station.

At around six a.m., I asked a passer-by if I could use his phone to which he agreed kindly. I called Asadu who came to collect me at the station. He graciously allowed me to stay at his place while I looked for work, which gave me a few hours to rest. I had a few leads, thanks to some phone numbers given by a friend of mine who worked at the BBC. I assumed the contacts were local Arabs but I was surprised to find that one contact—Aisha in Abu Dhabi—was a woman who agreed to see me. She was an African from Zanzibar.

When we met in the evening she had no idea I came with my luggage in tow to stay at her place. She hesitated for a few minutes and then suggested that perhaps I could stay with her male relatives in Sharjah, which I did. Each day, I came up short looking for work in Dubai and after a week, I could sense that perhaps I had overstayed my welcome so I decided to return to Dubai to do any work like other Ugandans were doing while I kept up the search for a job in journalism.

The challenge was finding basic inexpensive accommodations to sleep in Dubai. I already had exhausted most of my precious supply of *dirhams* and I had less than 50 *dirhams* at this point. When I had returned to Dubai on Friday evening one of the Ugandans I knew suggested I would attend their community gathering in the evening in hopes of finding a fellow national who would be willing to put me up for a few nights. I would stay for three days and do a job of packing containers in order to collect enough funds for rent. At the gathering, I found that only one person had space in his veranda, which included a mattress and bed linens. He didn't require any payment but wanted assurances that I would stay for no longer than a week, hopefully enough time to earn sufficient money to find my own rental. His place was a studio

flat that already was occupied by more than ten individuals and truly the only free space was on the veranda. In fact, a number of people stayed on verandas in Dubai. I could easily see several places in neighboring buildings where people set their mattresses on the verandas late in the evening. The only curtain of privacy was made of clothes hanging from a wire mesh screen. Even at night, there was no respite from the day's brutal heat. It was June and temperatures easily exceeded 100 and 110 degrees Fahrenheit.

The only saving grace was that I could sit inside before lights out and we often watched Ugandan music videos or films, which really was the only source of entertainment any of us could afford. And the scene was bittersweet, as I sensed most people in the room felt deeply nostalgic about their Ugandan homeland even as they decisively abandoned it several years earlier to find work that paid a decent, honest wage.

In the mornings I would always join other job seekers who lingered around Vienna Hotel hoping to get at least a chance to do a day's worth of labor. We called the place *Kikanuulo* and the people waiting for work there the *brokers*. A few individuals looking for help would select some of the Ugandans who hung around the hotel to take for simple tasks such as carrying their bags or loading their containers. The experienced brokers always had customers with whom they loaded containers, as they would just come to pick up a few men to help with loading and pay them on the spot.

Asadu was among the most experienced brokers and, as a result, he managed to get me hired for a few quick tasks. He also had other two newcomer relatives: Yusuf, his brother who also was my other old boy from Luggo, and Hamis Semakula, who was related to him by marriage. It was like an unspoken agreement that the three of us would not work for any other person than Asadu. The problem with Asadu's jobs was he often paid less. For example, for two days' work that others might have paid 200 *dirhams*, he only paid a measly forty. The three of us frequently complained among ourselves about the low wages but none of us dared to challenge the informal agreement we had accepted tacitly with Asadu. However, Asadu could be benevolent especially when there was no work to be had. He would never take lunch until he was sure the three of us had eaten. If he called in the evening hours and someone had not

eaten he would immediately invite us to join him at Hajjati Diana's place for lunch or would allow us to go there and eat on his credit. We all came to be known by the restaurant as Asadu's sons.

Hajjati Diana's restaurant was a one-room studio flat that functioned simultaneously as a bedroom for several girls and a cheap Ugandan food restaurant. A lunch entrée was quite cheap, generally between five and twenty *dirhams*.

Loading containers was not an easy task, especially in the searing dry heat of Dubai in June, and I was not the most athletic individual. Occasionally, the others would ask me to stand inside the container while another handed me the materials to pack. It was particularly tough when we were packing tiles or cement. The inside of a container was stiflingly hot and I sweated so much that I frequently could wring enough moisture out of my shirt as if I was wringing a washcloth after a bath. Of course, I needed to constantly hydrate myself and fortunately, several clients brought us enough water to drink. However, others expected us to buy it on our earnings, and that was not going to be me because every *dirham* counted. Instead, I would try to find a municipal location which provided free chilled water, a common sight on many Dubai streets.

Hamis became a good friend but he often teased me, especially when I was sweating so profusely. He would say things like "Yasin, just be kind and tell us: how did you end up here with your university degree," or "Does anyone among you people regret not going to school after lifting these tiles with one of Uganda's best students." I tried to maintain a thick skin which was made easier by the fact that we all laughed at lines like these in good jest. I knew that Hamis was not trying to be mean-spirited in any way.

Chapter 15

While the itinerant labor was a little better than sporadic, my prospects for more substantial, longer-term professional work were dimming quickly, especially as my visa's expiration date approached. Already there were a few people betting for my passport, telling me I should give them the passport and air ticket and they'll return to Uganda under my name. It always seemed to happen that way, where once an individual arrived, he would give his passport to a stranger—often an older man—who would be able to leave Dubai successfully without the switch being detected. Apparently, few if any immigration officers were capable of distinguishing African faces. The trick was for someone to pass through border control with an Emirates woman if the person was a man and vice versa. Emirati men never expected women to be dishonest and exchange passports whereas Emirati women were too shy to look men into the eyes and confront them accordingly. The most common advice was that, "if she looks at you don't fidget, just smile and be confident and then she will lose confidence in herself and look down as she stamps your passport."

Still, a few managed to be caught. If one was caught at the airport it would be his bad luck because the passport owner would continue working without a single document, risking being nabbed as undocumented. Some individuals, however, were lucky enough to stay undetected until they earned enough money so that they could take title to a newcomer's passport and air ticket. Often the deal was consummated at a low price—usually no more than 500 *dirhams*.

I decided I would not be party to such schemes so I failed to buy into any of this rubbish. Meanwhile, I continued with my job search still hopeful that the right, proper opportunity would come. I always traveled with my passport in my pocket, treating it as preciously as a wallet. I also knew that if I turned down someone's request they would be more than eager to pay someone close or a roommate to get my passport.

The Ugandan brokers laughed at my insistence to find a professional job. Some suggested that I could become an imam but that I should not expect to work in someone's professional office,

as one elder member of the community contended. In their world, they knew some Ugandan imams and thought that might represent my best hopes. Trying to remain undeterred, quietly I was becoming increasingly worried about the growing improbabilities of finding the sort of work that would keep me in Dubai. Of course there were some Ugandans doing professional jobs, though most of them were working for international companies. These individuals steered cleared of the brokers.

I remembered the eldest member in the community warning me: "You expect an Arab or Indian to see your black face every day in his office and then he remembers you are on his payroll as if there are no fellow Indians to do the job." He added emphasis with a Ugandan proverb—"*Eriiso lyo mukulu*"—which roughly translated that elders are always insightful and clear.

While I heard his words, I proceeded as usual, continuing doing the short-term cargo loading jobs and using my money to travel from one job search to another. I had now expanded the list of my job options to include becoming an imam. There were a number of Ugandan imams working in the UAE, mostly at Ras Al Khaimah where many had studied. But from my ongoing search I also had learned that one could turn up at an Awqaf or Islamic affairs department in any of the emirates to do a Quran reading interview and, if successful, be given a mosque appointment. However, there were no openings for *muezzins* (callers for prayer) as in most mosques because here the imam did both. Yet, upon hearing the qualifications like successfully memorizing five *ajzaa* (parts of the Quran) I thought I would have a respectable chance to qualify.

I had, to my credit, three clear *ajzaa*, the last one in the Quran; Qadi Samia, Tabaraka and Amma. I also had memorized a number of independent *surahs* like Yasin, Saffat, Al Rahman, Al Waqia, Al Kahf, Maryam, Yusuf, and parts of Baqara and Nissai. I hoped that perhaps these would be sufficient substitutes to make up for the remaining two *ajzaa*.

I decided that I also needed a beard to look like a *mutwawa* (pious man) along with a good revision of all the parts of the Quran I had mastered. This process would take me about a month of not shaving but just trimming my beard enough to

remain clean. Likewise, I would need to revise and fine tune all of the Quran sections I already had committed to memory. After prayers every morning, I stayed in the mosque to revise, asking any Arab who was around to listen and critique my recitation. After about an hour or two I would go out to Kikanuulo to find a cargo-lading job for the day.

My motivations energized my daily routines. I felt good about the prospects of having my own house with my own bedroom, free water and electricity as well as a respectable salary just for the objective of leading prayers. I thought, no wonder, my grandfather Sheikh Hood had all along wanted me to become an imam and how he trained me to be a preacher. Now he would be happy in his grave, seeing me leading Arabs in prayer, though not yet a preacher. There are no preachers in the UAE, as they all just read a sermon of Awqaf. The secularized government is keen to censor what people learn from mosques. Thus, I knew that my chances would be highly limited if non-existent about practicing Sheikh Hood's sermons in the hopes that one day, I would be respected as a preacher just as he was.

Chapter 16

Yet, this was not my only job search option because I wanted to keep every avenue open in order to accept the first meaningful opportunity that emerged. Again, I would go to local English newspapers or even public relations companies that I had Googled. There were few chances of meeting anyone with the responsibility of hiring, as the security guards were so rude. Often, my only contact was to drop off my applications and copies of my CV and wait for the offices to call if my services were needed. This would prove to be utterly hopeless.

I knew that if at least I had the opportunity to demonstrate my capabilities in a face-to-face interview, I could potentially land a job in a newsroom. However, the gatekeepers at most office lobby desks made that next to impossible. I had worked out a weekly schedule that included two days loading container cargoes and another two days searching for a job.

However, the expiration date on my visa was staring me starkly in the face, and I started to panic. It was increasingly difficult to not sound so desperate when it came to applying for news jobs. There literally were thousands of job openings advertised in the classifieds every day—many with large multinational corporations and news agencies—but not one job for Yasin.

I knew my foremost obstacle was getting past the security guards in the office lobbies. These men were as poor as me and I knew that none of them could appreciate just how desperate I was so I decided I needed to neutralize their defenses. Prayer always helped me in moments when I needed enterprising creative inspiration. I strongly believed that if I met a prospective editor superior I would have at least a solid chance for the job. One listing for *The Evening Post* called for a change in tactics. I searched the Internet and familiarized myself with the editor's name and background before I headed to the paper's offices in the Rafah district.

The security guard waved me to stop but I indicated that I had an appointment with Mr. Bikram Vohra, acting as if I was a reporter with important business. Without a further word, he waved me in and I ignored the receptionist, who could block me from further access. Inside the offices, I was unsure about where I

needed to go but I looked for any surroundings that resembled a newsroom. Finally, I asked a reporter where "Bikram" was.

A woman responded in Hindu—or Malabari, as I didn't know the differences in those early days—but I saw the man who answered to his name. He was middle aged, wearing a long-sleeved shirt and sweater. I introduced myself, adding that I spoke English and Arabic fluently and that I was someone who could get stories in the Arabic and African communities. I had done my homework knowing that stories dealing with an African angle were rarely published. I launched into the account of an African woman who died of poison in Deira, a story that didn't appear in any newspaper. The editor called over a Sudanese man who worked as the paper's translator, and introduced him as another African. Now, my heart was racing and I eagerly explained that we could work as a team. However, he stopped me short while he tried to remember my name. The editor added that the Sudanese man was not a reporter but a translator. He asked for the two of us to conduct a small conversation in Arabic, as a test. Apparently I passed because he immediately asked for my documents and said I would be hired.

I almost collapsed at the news. After reviewing my degree certificates he said I would need an attesting confirmation in order to obtain an employment visa. In Dubai, it was illegal to employ someone with a visitor's visa, and he urged me to return when I had the attested certificate. I had the original copies, but I needed confirmation from a Ugandan government official. I sent them to Uganda along with the fee so they could be confirmed by the ministry of foreign affairs and then transferred to the Saudi Arabian embassy because there was no Emirates embassy in Uganda at that time.

The process took just a week but I also need to send the certificate through a courier to Saudi Arabia. The courier wanted seven hundred *dirhams* for the fee and it would take ten days of labor loading containers in order to make that much money. And, then that is if I was able to obtain work for ten consecutive days.

Time also was not on my side. My visa was set to expire in about a week's time and I could not afford the possibility of letting this job opportunity to slip through the cracks. In bed, I

decided that perhaps again I could use the same trick to meet editors at yet another newspaper.

My target this time was Sharjah's *The Gulf Today*.

I took a bus route that dropped me off at the Eppco station—one of the stops just before Al Khan Bridge where I would have to cross eight lanes of road to the other side. I followed the same tactic at the newspaper offices, telling the security guard that I had an appointment with the editor. I did not anticipate that he would call the editor to verify the appointment, and I could hear him explain that an African man was waiting in the lobby to see him. Apparently, the editor seemed not to understand a word of what he said. The security guard handed the phone to me and my mind swung into swift mode. I knew that if I asked for a job, all the editor would say was to leave the CV with the security guard. Instead, I indicated that I wanted to discuss an internship placement, adding that the paper would benefit from my knowledge and contacts in the African community. I could better explain how such an arrangement might work if he allowed me to come over for a meeting, perhaps no more than five minutes. The tactic worked. He hired me after testing my English and Arabic.

My new editor was my hero. He said I could start work immediately while the process of attesting degree certificates and visa confirmation proceeded. I finally had my lucky day.

Chapter 17

My visa expired just a few days after starting work at *The Gulf Today* so I managed to get a day off so I could renew it. However, I was shocked when the immigration officer said my visa was not eligible to be renewed and he refused to hear any further questions. There was no way I could return to Uganda and raise the money I'd need to return to Dubai. Depressed and resigned, I sat underneath a tree outside the immigration office, noticing how stressed everybody looked who was going inside to see if they would be able to remain in the country. Women were on the verge of tears. It seemed like an endless parade of hapless, sick, desperate people who had to battle significant odds against immigration officers who effectively had the judicial power to sentence individuals to a lifetime of irreversible poverty. I could not believe that I was destined to become one of those individuals.

Another man—who appeared to be from Africa—sat nearby also in the shade and was on the verge of tears. At first I thought he was from Kenya and I tried talking to him in Swahili but his coastal language was as poor as with most Ugandans. I talked to him in Luganda and he responded with a smile of relief, suddenly realizing that he had a brother beside him. His name was Edward Tugume, which I knew meant that he was from western Uganda. Like me, he learned that he could not renew his visa, although his answer came from the director, the administrative superior to the immigration officer I saw at the counter. With renewed spirit, I asked him where the director's office was. He shrugged as if it the situation was utterly helpless. My mind might have indicated that I should believe him but my heart was directing me otherwise. I excused myself, adding that I was responding to the mid-day call for prayers.

I sprinted to the mosque, prayed two *rakats* and left before the recitation of congregation prayers to find the director's office. The secretary told me he was preparing to leave for prayers but I insisted, without giving the receptionist any other details, that I had an urgent matter, which must be resolved before he left. The director overheard me and invited me into his office and I said the customary greeting indicating how very kind it was for him

to see me and how I prayed that God will accept all of this kindness from him and grant him whatever he wants in this world. I told him I was a Muslim journalist who had just started at Dar Al Khaleej, which was the parent company of its *The Gulf Today* and the Arabic paper *Al Khaleej*, which was the biggest selling newspaper in the UAE. I mentioned that my visa was set to expire in two days, which was not enough time for a new visa to be prepared and approved so I just needed help to renew it for another month. I added that the good thing with us Muslims is that we always help each other, especially for religious duties.

On the spot, I recited a Quran verse that justified it and seemed most appropriate for the circumstances of the moment. The verse from *ch4:75* enjoins Muslims not merely to sit in desperation as God's world was wide. I recited in the Matrud rhythm, explaining that I had no excuse in front of Allah for not helping my people as God's earth was wide, and if I failed to do this in Uganda then I should move to Dubai and accomplish this goal accordingly.

The director listened and waited until I was done to speak. He complimented me: "Mashaallah, good voice. Where did you learn the Quran from?"

I answered and he asked me for my passport and visa copy, signed the documents, and told me to go to any counter to get the stamp for another month's extension. Joyful, I left the office and found Tugume, who did not accept the news in good temper. He immediately launched into a tirade about how Muslims discriminated and abused their privileges. We parted ways without any resolution.

While the extension helped, I still did not have my residency visa at the end of the month. The bureaucracy moved at a glacial pace and there didn't seem to be any concrete explanation for why this was so. The newspaper's human resources office gave me the choice of going back to Uganda and return once a residency visa was secured, with the days away being subtracted from my salary. I thought this was another potentially dangerous risk not returning because the option did not include a return air ticket. Instead, I chose to stay and pay the fines once my visa would be ready. It finally came after a two-month delay.

Meanwhile, Aunt Zakiya and Abdullah had both been on my neck with emails to ensure that I would honor my promise of not overstaying. I ignored their pleas by reassuring them that there was no problem of getting the visa secured but that it was just a typically slow bureaucratic process. My fines came to more than 6,000 *dirhams* and one of the newspaper's human resources executives advised me to go to Sharjah immigration court for an alternative option. He recommended that I would pay 1,000 *dirhams* to go through a purely paper process of changing the visa status to a legitimate one where the extended two-month stay was not illegal.

With others, it was a matter of change the visa from a visiting status to a residency one inside the court system. The problem was that when I went to the immigration offices in Al Qassimiya, I was turned away because my visa was for Dubai. In other words, I had to clear my fines in Dubai, where in making the same court case cost me about 4,000 *dirhams* and another 500 for changing the visa within the UAE.

The fines set me back financially quite a bit and I had to take a loan from the office that would have to be repaid in three months. After all of the delays, transfers, and switches of rectifying my visa status, I finally was able to email a copy to Abdullah and Aunt Zakiya that all obligations had been satisfied. They thanked me but, truthfully, I knew I had to *thank them* instead.

Chapter 18

I was still staying in Deira when I started at *The Gulf Today*. Occasionally I took a bus to Sharjah, disembarked at the first subway on Al Khan, and then walked back to the office, a distance of about half a kilometer. The office was on the other side of the road and there was no stage nearby. At the office, drivers could take reporters to any location for an assignment. In the evening I would return to Dubai and share a ride in one of the cabs that were parked near the newspaper offices. After about two weeks at work I was quite broke and would forgo the evening taxi rides, which cost four *dirhams*, and just walk to Deira. One time, Kato, a friend also from the Kawempe village, passed me as I was footing it along the Hor Al Anz back to Deira. I did not notice that he had passed me but when we assembled at the Taimex shipping company that accommodated us in the evenings for talks he asked me where I was coming from. He said, "Man, I was stopping to take you but saw that you were sweating and my girlfriend was in the car. She would be inconvenienced but sorry."

He paused and then continued, "But do you really walk all the way from Sharjah?"

Undoubtedly, my personal financial situation was still quite desperate but I also was happy about finding a good job. I had applied for some advance to pay the room rent that was due, and the request was still in process. Certainly the people in the room were tired of waiting for their money. The landlord Hajj Nooh was quite hesitant to confront me, taking some comfort in the fact that I was working. However, one of the roommates we called Sheikh Kirevu, because of his long beard and religious stances, did not buy into those excuses. The room had three double beds, and I was sharing my bed with another newcomer—Abbasi—because we both couldn't afford to pay for a full bed at 600 *dirhams* so we each paid 350 instead to share it. It was Abbasi who called me after the room meeting to tell me that Sheikh Kirevu had passed a ruling not to allow me back into the room unless I came with the rent money.

That night I thought it prudent not to fight for a bed so I went to another room which was occupied by Hamis Semakula, yet another friend. I had been sleeping in Hamis' bed for about two hours but I was awake to the fact that people were still talking

in the room. A woman who was subletting the bed space to the people in the room turned up on the door, not sure who had alerted her of the "flookers." Although I had visited Hamis before, this was the first time I had asked to sleep there. I overheard the woman begin explaining how she was suffering to raise a living herself and how the room people were letting her down by bringing "flookers" who never paid rent to her room. She insisted that anyone who didn't belong to the room move immediately, and I knew she was referring to me even though I had covered myself in Hamis' bracket from the time she had come to the door. I confessed and left and Hamis promised that he would contact me shortly so that I could return.

I stood outside the building, where there were several Ugandans chatting and I kind of felt ashamed to even join their banter, knowing that soon they would tire and leave to find somewhere else to bunk for the night while I would be able to return to Hamis' room. While we waited, someone drove by, asking if anybody wanted to go to the airport. There were quite a few Ugandan cab drivers so impulsively I jumped in, not sure about my plans but spending some time at the airport seemed like a good call in the middle of the night.

I woke up at around six a.m. to discover three missed calls on my phone, all from the cab driver and the last contact was two hours before. I had to take a bus back to Deira, wait a few minutes until I was sure Sheikh Kirevu had left the room for work and I entered to take a shower and get ready for work. That day at work brought some good news as I found my advance ready so I could pay the rent. I noticed everyone in the room was quite apologetic and quick to blame Sheikh Kirevu as they asked where I had stayed the previous night. I stayed with them for that month and eventually moved to Sharjah to save on transport.

Chapter 19

Colonel, a friend from Uganda whom we met at Taimex, offered to find a space in Sharjah for me. He called himself "Colonel" because of his staunch support of Uganda's opposition leader Colonel Kizza Besigye. To this day, I still don't know his real name but we became friends as a result of some political discussions we had. He wanted me to be his wingman at his place, which had a steady stream of female visitors and guests. I knew this at best would be a brief temporary spot for me because I could not handle the constant hubbub. A man from India staying in a studio flat on Al Wahda Road near the first bus line I used when I arrived in the UAE agreed to have me as a roommate. His wife was temporarily out of the country for the birth of their child and he had two previous roommates who did not pay their rent. Regardless of my origin or background, I apparently was an ideal roommate because I paid my rent and I was a Muslim.

We lived happily the first month sharing stories about our countries and culture. He told me his wife had not been happy with him staying with an African when he told her and many of his relatives asked him why he would stay with an African, but he didn't care. He said he was not, as he described, a "bloody racist," wondering why his neighbors seemed so disproportionately curious about why he decided to have an African roommate.

Early one morning—at about one—he returned home, tapped on my legs while I slept, and woke me insisting that I pack my belongings and leave immediately. He reeked of alcohol and appeared to be drunk, so I assumed that he could only muster the nerve to ask me to leave while he was inebriated. It had been two days since I paid my second month's rent and electricity bill on time, and the sudden request mystified me. I hesitated for a moment about asking why he had decided to evict me and if I had done anything wrong but instead I asked him to give me back my money. He placed 400 *dirhams* on the table, adding that he was deducting 100 *dirhams* for the two days I had stayed with him. I lost it there, and before I realized I was shouting he already had run out of the room, scared. At the door a number of other Indians were congregating; the voices that I could discern

spoke Malabari but the words "Africa" and "Nigeria" leapt out with stinging force.

In about ten minutes two police men turned up, asking the crowd at the door to stay outside and only allowing the owner of the apartment to enter. I could tell he was shaking even when he entered with police as I tried my best to remain calm and cool. One of the police was a Sudanese man, who asked me in Arabic if I had beaten him to which I replied no. I told my story and the police asked him to repay me in full. He brought another 100 *dirhams* acting as if he had borrowed the sum and added it to the notes on the table. I left with the police who ensured that the small crowd of Indians who gathered nearby would not harass me.

In the middle of the night, I took the road toward the city center as the police drove their Nissan Pathfinder toward the Al Khan Bridge. I returned to Colonel's place to stay for the night. It was about a kilometer away but my two pieces of luggage were so heavy that I kept switching bags between my hands as I lumbered across the street for the short distance.

Mohamoud, one of the occupants, opened the door to Colonel's place after a few knocks. It was a two-bedroom apartment with a sitting room and large corridor. The apartment was in the name of Abdul Aziz, who was subletting out to others while he stayed in one bedroom. Colonel stayed in another bedroom and Mohamoud shared the sitting room with five others, and it was here where I would stay for the night.

I woke up to the noise of a kitchen conversation at nine a.m. Colonel asked Mohamoud who allowed me to come back and Mohamoud pleaded ignorance. Colonel probed, wanting to know if there was a female guest, which, of course, there was none. Colonel had remembered our earlier talks about me not wanting to stay if there were female guests, a topic which now piqued Mohamoud's interest.

"He means he can't stay in a room if someone is entertaining some girl," Mohamoud said. "He is then in a very wrong place, and, in fact, admitting him to our place would be trading our freedom."

It was clear they were planning on throwing me out, but I was also planning to look for a room, in case of any emergency that threatened to leave me homeless. Colonel proposed that Abdul

Aziz might be lenient enough to let me stay on a day-to-day basis, provided that I did not overstay my welcome. While the conversation went on, I pretended to be asleep and acted alarmed when they rustled me awake.

I immediately checked my mobile to find seven missed calls from the office. I knew my editor Rakesh was trying to locate me. I showered and joined Colonel and Mohamoud for a quick breakfast of eggs before I dashed off to the office. I asked Rakesh about switching my days off, offering to work instead on Friday, so I could find a new place to live. I spared all of the details except to Fareed, an Indian reporter who had become a close colleague in the office. He also made some suggestions about where I might find an African-friendly place for accommodations. However, after making dozens of calls, I came up empty. Every person I called started with that customary Dubai question of greeting: "Which country?"

As soon as I uttered my homeland, the person hung up or dashed off some excuse that the room was already taken. Few dared to say that African nationals were the wrong nationality, as they preferred Indians or Pakistanis. I went around taking numbers of bed space adverts on walls and all I got was the same response. I returned to the Colonel's home and found Abdul Aziz preparing some lunch, so we chatted as I assured him that I was seriously looking for bed space and that I had even taken a day's leave from work. He advised that I bypass the Arabic advertisements and just call Arabs directly. Many Egyptian and Sudanese nationals apparently were amenable to those of African nationalities.

I purchased the Arabic newspaper *Al Khaleej* and began another round of making calls listed on the adverts but only this time to Arabs. I regularly received the same previous response. Even those that advertised for a decent Muslim bachelor had a problem with my nationality and apologized. I contemplated returning to Dubai and staying with Sheikh Kirevu who could perhaps help me find accommodations that would be friendly for a Ugandan like me. Transportation would eat into my limited financial resources but I had few alternatives left.

I set out for the evening Maghreb prayer in the mosque before returning calling Ugandans in Dubai for a bed placement. It was

after the prayers in Abu Shagara mosque where I found an advert in Arabic also calling for a Muslim bachelor. I called the number and they gave me the address, which was about ten minutes from the mosque. It was a two-bedroom flat with the customary sitting room, and its owners were Yemeni bachelors Imad and his brother Shaikri, along with their brother-in-law Mohammed and Fouad, another Yemen relative. I could take the free room and even sublet to another person but the owners insisted on paying the room's full rent upfront. I accepted and paid in cash, got a key and ran to collect my two heavy pieces of luggage. I was able to quickly rent the remaining bed space to two Ugandans. The move turned out well as I stayed with Imad for the next two years building a bond of brotherhood. In fact, even after each of us were married, we still met socially and our wives became friends with each other as well.

Chapter 20

Two months after I joined *The Gulf Today* another Ugandan reporter came on board. A smart journalist, he had more experience having previously worked in the Ugandan and Rwandan media. One of his first stories he wrote concerned Ugandan expatriates without visas who were struggling to make ends meet in the UAE. The article stirred a lot of hostility among the Ugandan community and the critics decided to target their blame and anger toward me because I was a familiar face. Some would shout at me "Inshaallah" about betraying or even abandoning them. The word indicated that something would happen to me as a result of my perceived betrayal. Not more than three people read the story but anyone who has lived in any community of Ugandans will agree that even the speed of light does not match the rapid word-of-mouth spreading among Ugandans.

To most Ugandans the article invited the police to crack down on their communities. Whenever there was a police raid and some people were apprehended, the individuals would utter my name in their prayers. Despite my best efforts, it was futile to try to convince my fellow Ugandans that I did not write the story. In fact, few bothered to hear that I, too, was also actually staying without a visa as my residential visa had delayed and, as such, I could not and would not write such an article. All of my protests mostly fell on deaf ears.

The article defined a less-than-productive relationship that Ugandan journalists would have with their community members for years, one that was always shadowed by strong suspicion. More Ugandan reporters would come on board and some of my Indian friends said jokingly that I was plotting with friends to take up all the reporters' jobs in the UAE. The fact was that Ugandans learned to master rather quickly the professional demands of journalism and they managed to earn a good reputation for that. Wherever a Ugandan reporter worked, one could say confidently that the staff found him hard working and creative in getting stories in a country where officials rarely, if ever, spoke on record to a reporter.

Within five years of my arrival, I noticed that Ugandans were in almost every English newspaper in the UAE with the exception of just one whose politics of joining the ranks involved a more sophisticated process than at other newspapers. I know it will still take quite a few years to have Ugandans on editorial mastheads in Dubai. Today, the editorial desks mostly feature people of the same nationalities. Not meant as a criticism but it is a fact: an Indian likely will be at an Indian desk while a British desk might only take an American but not an Indian as well. Arab reporters say similar things about Arabic papers. If the editorial content is targeted for Egyptians then the reporters would be Egyptian and if is for Syrians then the journalists would be Syrian, with perhaps a perfunctory exemption of having one or two Emiratis merely for show.

The tacit approval obviously reinforces the cultural practice in the field, as reporters realize that their livelihoods are more likely to be assured by maintaining a "don't-rock-the boat" mentality. The Ugandans or Sudanese would not be looking to restrict their desk domains to a particular nationality once a few of them become editors in Arabic or English papers. They would definitely like to work side-by-side with Indians, British or Syrians. Simply, this is what we shall call the "African Dubai Dream."

After getting a job as a journalist I soon became the first reference for any Ugandan who came into Dubai looking for a job. Word had moved so rapidly that journalism was one field that Ugandans could readily find work in but some of these messages were, of course, exaggerated. But whenever I got a call from anyone who wanted a job, I always did my best, regardless of the circumstances or the odds. At the start it was easier to place someone in *The Gulf Today* where I had worked as a new journalist. A Jordanian national woman who had worked with me in the paper as a translator one time helped me to place someone who had inundated me with emails, phone calls, and had asked friends who knew me to encourage me to help him find a job upon his arrival in Dubai. Abrar had climbed from a translator job when I left the paper to a position as administrative director. I called her and she had expected me to be

in Bahrain but I was in Dubai, scouting a reporting job for a Ugandan friend. By the end of the call, she agreed to hire him as a favor for me.

That was a very lucky start for the newcomer, really the only case among the many job seekers I handled in Dubai who did not have to walk endlessly from office to office looking for a job. But the easy entrances at *The Gulf Today* could not last. Once Abrar left the paper and Mr. Anand left his post as editor-in-chief—both wonderful allies and colleagues—I had no one else to help easily place Ugandans there. All the new people in editorial were friends who had worked with me for more than a year but who also were unhappy with my leaving. They would often tell the people I sent to them that Yasin used this place as a training hub for his own exclusive purposes and that any new reporters would do the same—using *The Gulf Today* as a short-term stepping stone. They wanted long-term commitments and demonstrations of loyalty. However, I have always subscribed to the philosophy of when one door closes others will open immediately afterward.

In one instance, there was an old friend whom I had personally recommended to come and find work in Dubai, as things in Uganda were not working out for him. After *The Gulf Today* turned him down I thought of *Khaleej Times*, where I knew the local editor—an Indian woman Myra whom I met first at a press conference in Dubai and later at a British Counsel media workshop. We became good colleagues in that workshop and whenever we were asked to split off into groups for an assignment, we were always together.

She told me she liked Africans because they were brilliant. So when I called her on behalf of my friend, I reminded her of the African in the workshop. She agreed to see him. Myra administered a simple translation assignment and then asked him to come up with some story ideas the next day. He had a good opportunity to prove himself as the regular Dubai police reporter was on vacation in Sudan. I was then working at a local television station and I always gave him some story ideas on which I could help. In fact, I always made it a habit to notify him whenever I learned of breaking news. We worked together on fires, building collapses, and major traffic accidents.

But one story we did together caused him problems that he feared would compromise the good reporting opportunities he had experienced at the paper. The story concerned people who were being tested for HIV and AIDS in small clinics before taking the major immigration tests. The rationale was once someone was infected then there was no reason for the individual to continue with the immigration process because eventually he or she would be deported. We went to one clinic in Sharjah that offered the tests, where the presiding physician asked us for 200 *dirhams* before he would go on record but neither of us had the cash on hand. And, we didn't need to follow such a practice because we had enough evidence to verify the story's claims without his quotes.

There were also several Africans who had visited the clinic before and those who had tested positive had given up job searches and resorted instead to working as freelance brokers or itinerant laborers without a residential visa. We discovered many cases and we talked to them on a promise of anonymity. Meanwhile, another reporter in the *Khaleej Times* office who was working the health beat asked officials about these testing protocols at the clinics, and they, of course, denied such practices.

However, once the story was published with two bylines, officials from the Sharjah department of health were angry. They called the regular health reporter whom they knew well and obtained my friend's phone number. They also called him with a lot of threats asking to give the clinic's name as well as contact information for all of the anonymous people cited in the article. I told my friend not to yield to their threats and not to try to strike a deal with the officials because any agreement would eventually backfire against him. I recommended that he suggest the officials call his editors and, in the meantime, he should tell the editors not to divulge any identifying information about the sources for the article or otherwise they would be deported. Likewise, my journalist friend also would risk deportation. The pressure was tough because he was receiving calls every five minutes either from his editorial office or the health department but I told him he should be firm that he was merely following what the professional standards that govern every international journalist. Apparently, the paper's

editors decided they would run an apology the next day, adding they were happy with my friend for being firm about his professional obligations. He got the job immediately after the saga.

Another opening opened in the tabloid *7Days*, which had hired Fareed, a close Indian friend of mine from the days at *The Gulf Today*. We always met for lunch or tea, regularly sharing the news about who had resigned and who were the new hires. At the time, I was with *The National* newspaper and Fareed was considering joining it. He had submitted his papers to TLE (*The National* local editor) and asked me to put in a word for him with the paper's editors. In a meeting with the editor, I learned *7Days* wanted a reporter in Abu Dhabi and the salary offer would be generous for anyone working in *The Gulf Today* or *Khaleej Times*. This is where I put in the word for my friend, who landed the post in Abu Dhabi.

The timing proved to be helpful in several instances. Fareed asked me if I knew any candidates available to take up the Dubai reporting job he was leaving and his call came at the right time as I had heard from a Ugandan friend who also had worked with me at *The Gulf Today*. He had resigned another job in Emirates 24/7 and returned to Uganda, as things had not worked out. He had just arrived in Dubai and was hoping to stay with me while he looked for employment. There was desperation in his voice, that kind every job seeker has when asking for a place to sleep. Of course, I had agreed to help him, picking him at the Sharjah bus station. He told me how life had turned very unkind but I attempted to reassure him that he would get a job with *7Days* and that he would do best to discontinue his efforts of trying to reunite with his former editors who were then with *The National*, his former employer. He was desperate enough to even return to *The Gulf Today* that paid as little as what was paid in Uganda. I encouraged him to follow my tactics, which was phone the editors only when he was at their office building and that he should not ask for a job while online or otherwise he would not be able to send over his resume. He did slip up though in one instance, where the editor told him to email the CV. I told him that his best chance would be to deliver by hand his resume so I suggested that he call him again, explaining that the email bounced back with an undeliverable address. I also

coached him to ask the editor to let him work on some stories for a probationary period and recommended that he have three ideas for stories prepared if the editor agreed to meet him in person.

The tactic worked as he nabbed the job but it was not a fail-proof approach. Yet, even while failures outdistanced the successes, I was able to help old classmates as well as even passing acquaintances land jobs in Dubai even shortly after they arrived in the nation at the airport. But, there were lots of instances where luck was hard to find. Some accepted the outcome as a normal occurrence of chance while others obsessed that if others could succeed, they were guaranteed to make it as well. Thus, they often blamed their disappointment on my not having tried hard or aggressively enough on their behalf.

Chapter 21

The community connections mattered in many instances. For example, I sent a friend to a security group recruiting company in Uganda that brings people to Dubai. I already had known the company manager whom I interviewed for a story. The manager asked my friend for fees of $2,000 and another $1,800 to cover his visa and air ticket. This information shocked me because on the two stories I had interviewed him, I never found out how much he was charging. What I learned from other contacts at the company they were recruiting for was that the visa and air ticket were given once a person is recruited. After taking that quote from the Dubai contacts, I didn't need to ask again the Ugandan manager for any further information.

Now this friend was telling me he had to almost pay $4,000 to come to Dubai in order to earn $300 a month. He already had paid a deposit of two thousand *dirhams* and was looking for the balance. How someone had all that money and could only think of coming to Dubai disturbed me. I had met a lot of people on my vacations to Kampala, many of whom were working and had resisted the temptation or demand to come to Dubai. I was ironically fascinated that I had almost become a victim of similar circumstances even as I knew that the realities and logistics didn't always add up in the lure or desire to find a better life in Dubai.

I explained to quite a few people that $4,000 could launch a pretty good business back in Uganda but that one would have to work many months as a security guard in Dubai in order to recoup the investment of coming to the Middle East in search of a stable, prosperous life. The problem with trying to advise individuals at home not to go abroad when they saw me as having a good livelihood and amenities such as my own car was one of misperception. A few doubted the sincerity of my intentions and concerns, perhaps thinking that deep down I was not committed to wishing my fellow Ugandans the best in their relocation efforts.

My mother had borrowed a lot of money from financial companies to see me make it to Dubai and now this friend of mine was

planning on selling part of his property in order to realize a similar dream. Yet, as the beginning of the two stories share similarities, the endings will, of course, be different. If I had come to Dubai to work as a security guard I would have had a lot of trouble to repay the debts to my mother, which totaled about $1,000. That is one reason I had to be grateful as most Ugandan security guards were college graduates like me and if a chance had opened its way in my desperate days I would not have refused it. We were sitting at a restaurant in Kampala and my friend asked me how much he could expect to earn, to which I replied that his take-home pay would be around $300 for eight hours' work in a day or $400 for twelve hours' work. He used a calculator to convert the figures in Ugandan shillings and smiled back at me.

"Do they give me accommodation?"

"You will share a room with two or three other people but buy your own food. They also transport you from their accommodation to your place of duty."

"Yasin, I am going for it if I can save about $200 every month. It is good for me."

While I try to sound encouraging, I know a number of guards who complain that they cannot even save $100 from that but he dismisses the concerns as evidence that others were being extravagant with their money.

My cautionary predictions, unfortunately for him, turned out to be true. After a month he was at work, he already panicked about exchanging the job for a higher paying position. Of course, he insisted upon disrupting every possible minute for me so I could help him find another job. I reminded him of a law that banned individuals from seeking new work for six months if they left a previous job in the UAE without just cause. He also learned from a human resources representative that he would have to pay back an air ticket and visa fees the company spent on him. The news unsettled him to the point that he complained to me that the man I put him in contact with for employment had cheated him.

I recalled him saying, "He took from me the money for visa and air ticket and these people now are saying things I don't understand."

The stark fact of an exploitative recruitment business and immigration that targeted Third World nations should make any intelligent, educated individual take pause before rushing off to a destination that holds tremendous economic promise but also is prime for taking full advantage of economically vulnerable individuals. The companies have effective contacts in the job markets and the knowledge of how to go about it but these valuable bits of information and insight often come at extremely high costs of personal investment.

Consider an example of another relative who left his job that paid at least $200 a month in Uganda to earn $300 in Dubai. He did not have to go through the recruitment companies but he asked me to help him obtain a visit visa. These visas can be had for around $700 in the black market, so he sent me the money and after a month, his visa had yet to be processed. The visa brokers had cheated me again, despite what I thought were the most reliable, trusted resources. Even as I had been in Dubai for five years these people still considered me as easy prey but I also decided not to engage a fight with anyone as I had in earlier situations. I paid from my pocket to arrange for another agent who delivered the visa in three days. My relative paid for his air ticket and he stayed at my home for about a month as we looked for a job. If I was available I gladly took him to job interviews or ensured that he knew how to use the bus system. A security company in Dubai gave him a job for $400 and after two months at work he called me with regrets about how his Kampala job was better.

"There is so much stress here and I cannot even save a thing," he told me.

On the other hand, the success stories underscored the potential for Ugandans who could realize a potentially satisfying life with relatively good and stable comforts that come with a prosperous livelihood. There were Ugandan brokers driving Lexus, Range Rovers, and Nissan Infiniti vehicles among other luxurious cars. Most of them worked for Angolan or Congo businessmen and handled expansive purchasing projects for either government or semi-government bodies. I knew one of them who always boasted that his "money can now be measured in kilograms but

not counted paper to paper." There were Ugandan beggars who made fortunes from UAE sheikhs and built major school projects, hospitals and rental houses back at home. So it was not really necessary for everyone coming to Dubai to find a professional job where people thought most employers were racist or skeptical about hiring someone from a different culture or ethnic background despite the well-advertised perceptions of Dubai and the UAE as one of the world's most welcoming cosmopolitan places.

The problem was that not all brokers or beggars had grown rich. In fact if one had to go through the successful stories one would find that they were actually quite rare compared to the number of those who struggled to make ends meet. However, the overall myth still carried valence for many Ugandans who sincerely believed that it doesn't matter what one does so long as living in Dubai because one's livelihood ultimately will be better. It was a myth not only associated with Dubai but also everywhere else, even the United Kingdom or America. People never thought of what they were going to do once they arrived. They just needed a visa and air ticket and it would all be sorted out in their new home. At its plainest level, this has been the universal history of immigration.

So pervasive was the myth that it also discouraged or prevented people from returning to Uganda even for short visits for fear that they might be ashamed for not amassing enough wealth or appear favorably when compared to others, especially those who stayed in Kampala. When I visited London my Ugandan host told me they were raising funds to return the corpse of one of their friends who had died abroad. The conversation still rings clear in my mind.

"It has not been so easy, Yasin, to get money from people. I think even this dead man is laughing up there in the refrigerator about how all the people who knew him cannot really pay a ticket to take his body," one of the friends told me.

I asked him why not bury him in London and he responded:

"Still we are going to have to collect some money for a burial here. The small plot of land to put the dead here has been sold and the funeral services will only be handled by some companies once they've been paid in advance."

He added, "If you add the costs of burial here and buying the ticket to return the body it's almost the same and then you realize he also has been buried on a foreign land."

In Dubai, of course, these stories were not limited to Ugandan nationals. Mohammed Kassim, one of my Yemen housemates, told me he had tried three times to get an American visa and failed, so that is why he came to Dubai.

"You are a very religious man, Mr. Kassim, a man who cannot even watch television because there are naked women. So how could you survive in America then?" I asked him.

"Listen. In Yemen not a single person doesn't want that visa stamp of America, even our president Ali Abdullah Saleh [now former]—if he got an American visa—will just abandon the president's ship and go start a new life there."

We both laughed about the Yemeni president but it also signaled how he really cherished the value of an American visa or passport.

Chapter 22

It was a Thursday afternoon when one of my wife's relatives wanted to meet. Malik Ssemanda had been in the UAE for a week, as he came through the recruitment agencies to work as a cleaner. I recommended the agency to him when I could not afford getting him the Dubai visa he desperately wanted. I went to the labor camp in Jebeli Ali around Dubai Investment Park to meet him.

Jobs as security guards and cleaners were common positions for Ugandans that were offered through the recruitment companies. There were few positions for hoteliers, nurses, and other professionals but these jobs were obtained not through recruitment companies but by other sources involving professional networks.

When we met, I could read from Malik's face straight away that he sensed from the get-go that it was a mistake in coming to Dubai. The recruitment agency promised a salary of US$600 but the company had put on the table a contract of 500 *dirhams* (US$150). The company did not leave the option of refusal open without pain of penalty. If he refused the job, he then would have had to pay back the air ticket and visa and risk having to work six months unpaid with the company before he would be eligible for a different position.

Malik's voice was thick with tension. "We already paid our air tickets and visa—about two million shillings—in Uganda to the recruitment agency to come here and these people now say we owe them their ticket." He grew a bit angry now. "It is all sounding like a trap—a mafia trap of human exploitation."

Malik's frustration was justifiable. At 500 *dirhams*—the equivalent of 300,000 shillings in Uganda—the wage would not have covered the basics of life back home. He also was college educated and I sympathized with him that, despite his qualifications, he could only manage a meager salary of 500 *dirhams*. On the other hand, I also reminded him of our talks in Uganda, cautioning him that Dubai was not an automatic economic paradise for émigrés. One could make this point over and over again but the cautionary advice always fell on deaf ears.

That night after meeting with Malik, I heard yet from another Ugandan national. Nassur, the son of a friend of my mother, sent me a text indicating that he was expecting a visit visa to be processed within a week and that he would be traveling immediately afterward to Dubai. Nassur did not go through the recruitment agency because it was prohibitively expensive. He had paid his own visa and air ticket, and, naturally, he was anxious to begin looking for work as soon as possible after arriving in Dubai.

He planned to stay at my home until he got a job and this was the one thing, which made me deeply apprehensive. He assumed with undeserved confidence that I would be able to have him placed almost instantaneously into a job in Dubai once he arrived at the airport. Of course, the visa's time limit made the game of finding work that much more challenging. The memories of my own race to find work before my visa expired were still painfully fresh in my mind and I recalled how the stress blossomed like a nasty virus with each day of not finding work.

My home became the hopeful stop for Ugandan immigrants at least twice a year and my responsibilities toward them seemed to expand all the time. The most difficult situation occurred as soon as their visa expired because now they had no one to turn to whether in Uganda or Dubai beside me. It never was an easy task. Naturally, my home was preferred over the cramped, less-than-hospitable quarters of a labor camp.

However, the biggest burdens were logistics. Most of them came without even a single coin for their transport and they needed to travel a lot around the metropolitan area in order find a job. It was one reason why many people abroad avoided newcomers. They often abandoned them at airports or other places, and, God forbid, I never even thought of doing this to any of my guests. I did not want others to endure what I had experienced, where one realized that the acquaintances and colleagues from school days were actually quite uncomfortable with putting up someone who was trying to plant his stakes in Dubai.

I always shared what little I had with my guests. When I had money for their immediate needs or transport I gave it to them without hesitation. And when I didn't have enough cash, I apologized. And, not all guests managed to find work. Those who did not find a job either returned to Uganda while others skipped over into the brokers' profession abandoning their passports and visas. These were the individuals who were the most ungrateful, willing to criticize me for failing to land them a job.

Chapter 23

Malik, my Thursday guest, was planning to stay at my home for the weekend, as he had not yet started work. The following day (Friday), I had more guests including two professionals—Ismael Numba, a journalist, and Godfrey Wampona, a computer engineer who worked in neighboring Ajman. Another security guard was a brother of my old school friend who was living in London. His brother had always called me asking to help find him work other than being a security guard. I also met Ashraf Luyima, who was working in Dubai airport's free zone.

There were a lot of experiences shared among this group of security guards, journalists and a single computer engineer. Ashraf was an Islamic degree holder from the International University in Khartoum. He spoke and wrote fluent Arabic but he was now a security guard earning 800 *dirhams* (US$250) and working at night, seven days a week. There were no holidays and his bosses always deducted 70 *dirhams* whenever he took a day off for being sick. The security guard company he worked for was one of the most popular in the country and the companies in Uganda that recruited both graduates had good connections in the government. The one that recruited Malik invited a popular member of the Ugandan parliament to speak to him before he left the country and he assured Malik and others in his speech that Dubai was the destination to become rich. The politician also visited Dubai regularly and I think he had some shares in the same company that exploited our people although he always spoke as a champion of poor people in his campaigns. Desperation and ignorance drove my countrymen into Dubai without much help.

I called the first secretary at the Ugandan embassy, and we talked for about an hour on the phone until even my ear started spinning. Initially, he understood I was chasing a news story and wanted to explain all that he could manage on the record while emphasizing that help for the individuals should be done first in Uganda, not in the UAE. He added the embassy's diplomatic work was to monitor but not to police and legislate matters. He also said they were not even present when these recruitment companies were being licensed in Uganda and the qualifications they had to

meet. He acknowledged there was a problem and a lot of people had turned to him for an air ticket to return to Uganda because their jobs fell short of their expectations. However, he said the blame for these problems fell upon the individual job seekers and recruitment agencies but not the government of Uganda nor its embassy in Abu Dhabi.

"How could someone graduate and go on a flight without first knowing the conditions of work and payments?" he asked. "If you cross the Ugandan border you are now at the mercy of the company that recruited you. It will seize your passport and you have to work for them according to the agreement when they bought your air ticket and visa, so how can the embassy then help you?"

I often called the first secretary at the embassy in Abu Dhabi whenever the diplomats and the Ugandan government were being criticized for their laissez-fair attitude toward helping citizens who had gone abroad. Both the first secretary and the ambassador had been summoned by a parliamentary commission for neglecting the Ugandans in Dubai, especially for leaving them to rot in prisons. So when the first secretary spoke to me, he treated me with the deference one would expect if he had talked with a member of parliament. He said if recruitment companies were violating standard rules and regulations a good journalist then should investigate them in Uganda, not the UAE.

Perhaps I was not a good journalist to ask. He had a point: the recruitment companies needed to be called to order not the embassy. The companies were directly responsible for making false adverts and it was incumbent upon individuals to do their own research about the work they hoped to do in Dubai and negotiate according to their qualifications. The embassy could not do this on their behalf.

Even as I indicated that our call was at its end, the first secretary at the embassy was still urging me to understand fully the embassy's position. He mentioned that he was traveling to Sharjah the following day because Uganda had a cricket match at the stadium. Outside of our professional connection, I considered the first secretary a friend and decent man. I believed he would be willing to help but maybe as he did explain, this was not the embassy's obligation. His assertion made sense: if someone left the country

willingly and was at the mercy of the sponsor in Dubai, no one at the embassy could help. However, from a journalist's perspective, that hardly made for a good story. As a journalist, I had seen again and again when governments neglect their people who have been exploited in forced labor or even trafficking that if they signed the contract then they could be helped.

Sure, the individuals agree to their terms but we also know the conditions of hopelessness and desperation under which these people sign these contracts. Regardless, all governments must rise to their obligation to ensure that these contracts are fair. This is how governments ensure order and equity for the welfare of their citizens. It was not a bad practice to facilitate the stream of Ugandans who want to work abroad but bringing college degree holders to work as cleaners was an insult that could not be reconciled by apologies or excuses. Any individual or entity that helped to bring these people to do work that fell well short of their capabilities was certainly guilty of being complicit in a conspiracy insulting ultimately Uganda, our universities and every group of professionals.

Chapter 24

On Friday, after sharing our experiences we advised Malik to relax and to eat in order to keep up his health. Meanwhile, we suggested he should go for the cleaning work while he continued searching for a job more in line with his training and expertise. Malik had the advantage of possessing a visa that was not scheduled to expire for at least another two months. The company threats of banning a worker for several months that then would not be able to get another job were really empty. Once one finds a job, he should then start thinking of thwarting the ban and working to repay their cheated visa and air ticket. The most important objective was to handle one hurdle at a time so we encouraged Malik to talk to the bosses of the company offices where he cleaned. We advised him there was no harm in telling them that he had just become a cleaner by fate and relaying his qualifications as an accountant with a decent portfolio.

Trial and error had fine-tuned the job search experience in Dubai. Always read the job postings in newspaper classifieds and on the Internet and send resumes and CVs or make calls. We told Malik no doubt that 500 *dirhams* was a paltry wage but we also reminded him that cleaners made a bulk of their income on tips, not salary. Some Ugandan cleaners who were responsible for shopping mall toilets could take home as much 200 *dirhams* in tips on a good day. Their best targets always were families with children, as they helped them out in those small cubicles and most of them gave out something. We were careful to distinguish the practice from begging because we certainly did not want anyone to compromise their sense of identity, integrity or worth. We told Malik that he should be strategic about this. The practice was ideally suited to places where large numbers of public visitors congregated such as malls and tourist destinations. Obviously, office buildings were not conducive to such practices.

Likewise, I gave Ashraf similar advice but with some distinctive variations. I knew he had no time but he also had to sacrifice part of his sleep during the day and look for a job. His fluency in Arabic was a major credit that he should be able to use rightly. I advised him to submit his papers to the ministry of education, check with Awqaf for any imam positions. He also could qualify to become a local police officer or handle translations for private

enterprises, as many of them were multinational in nature. I also offered to drive him to all Awqaf offices where I had established contacts so that he could perhaps nab an on-the-spot interview. I knew he might likely benefit from having a beard so I recommended that he avoid shaving for a few days.

Two weeks later Malik came back and he was now settled into a routine of working and using his days off to apply for jobs. I also had been escorting Ashraf around to apply for positions as an imam at various Awqafs. Our first destination was the Sharjah Awqaf, where I knew the public relations spokesman well and he put us in touch with the individual responsible for recruiting imams.

The first question zeroed in on age. Ashraf was thirty-three and the minimum mandatory age was thirty-five. In addition, he had to demonstrate that he had memorized more than half of the Quran. And, with that, Ashraf's opportunity for an interview ended.

Ashraf was shocked. He had spent the last two weeks revising the three *Ajzaa* he had memorized which constituted less than a quarter of the Quran. I told him that rejection and disappointment were certain in the ongoing process and that he should expect them accordingly.

Our next destination was the Ajman Awqaf, but before we entered the car, my editor called. He wanted to know if I had received his morning emails and how I was progressing with my latest assignment. I had taken a day off I pleaded and he responded, indicating that he had notified me in writing that my request for the day had been canceled. There was a breaking news story about a gold heist and the editor wanted quotes from the police in short order.

My own duty took precedence so I dropped the two job seekers at my home and promised to resume in the evening or the following day for Malik, as he would be staying overnight. They were also supposed to cook the meals that day. After my assignment, in the evening, we dropped Ashraf off at the Dubai airport free zone and I took Malik for a walk in Deira. Malik was anxious to get some feelings off his chest. He said they were being overworked doing the volume of tasks that was meant for ten people. He added that he could wait for six months but he was not able to stay for even a single month doing such exploitative work or else he would hope to die.

I still remember his desperate plea. "I want from you just a simple offer. Get for me a simple job no matter how little they pay but not overworking me like this," he said.

He carried a copy of *Khaleej Times*, which had an article about workers who were questioned about labor issues. Malik zeroed in on a particular line that suggested companies could not hire someone with an attested degree, and have him earning less than 12,000 *dirhams* per month. Likewise, an individual with some college experience should not earn less than 7,000 *dirhams* while those with a high school certificate should not be earning less than 5,000 *dirhams*.

"The problem is," I told him, "the law here is very different from its practice. You will find a law that says employers should not take away passports of workers but almost all companies here confiscate their employees' passports."

In Bahrain where I was working on a story about the alcohol ban in small hotels, I encountered a situation that echoed the plight of my Ugandan friends. I interviewed the owner of a small bar at a two-star hotel that was about to be closed and he was a bit upset at the prospect of seeing his waitresses lose their income. He allowed me to speak to Laila, a tall, brown-skinned Ethiopian waitress who wore a close-fitting black mini skirt and white top. Her beauty was so natural that she just needed the subtlest of cosmetics. During the interview, she asked for my help in securing new employment. In asking about the types of jobs for which she was qualified, she said she could teach the Quran or English. She said this in such a low mumble that I asked her to repeat what she had said. She mentioned that she was a *hafidh*, which indicated that she had memorized the entire holy text. She added that her sister also was a *hafidh*.

Now was the time to test her skills. I recited a verse from the second chapter of the Baqara *Surat*:

Wa Tabau Ma Tatilu Shayateen Ala Muluk Sulaiman Wa Ma Kafala Sulayman . . .

This verse is about the people during the times of the prophet Sulaiman or King Solomon who followed Shaytan and sorcery instead of following his teachings.

She easily completed the verse and continued into the next one. She spotted the other waitress, whose name apparently was Hafisa. Meanwhile I continued the challenge with the *hafidh*, this time reciting a verse from the Tawba *surat*, the same one that troubled a *hafidh* at an international Quran recitation competition in Dubai. The verse started:

Waqul Eamal fasayarah llahu Amalakum . . .

Both waitresses completed the verse as well and recited two additional verses as if they were singing the letters of the alphabet. If this had been an interview, they would have been hired on the spot. We then talked about how they had come to work as waitresses in a club. A recruiting agency had promised them teaching jobs but when they reached Manama the agency confiscated their passports and directed them instead toward waitressing jobs. They had been at the job for more than six months working day and night with no time to look for another job. They feared of retribution by their agency employer—of losing their legitimate passports. Hafisa said she welcomed the ban on alcohol, for which she had prayed fervently day after day. However, she asked that her quote not be on the record or otherwise her employer might act vindictively.

The interview was done and I had taken down their mobile numbers like any journalist would, obviously to do any follow-up in my reporting. However, I also hoped to be able to contact them in case I found jobs for them. Back at the office, I told my editor what I had learned which could be used as a sidebar to the original story. He could have cared less. "I don't care how many Qurans they know," he said. "All I need from you is the alcohol story I assigned." In Bahrain/Manama or Dubai or, in fact, any UAE town, the editors were bent at showing only the positive and being afraid to discuss religious issues.

Chapter 25

When I first arrived at the Dubai international airport, there were two groups: the GCC and others. As with many fellow Africans, I was placed among the others. But some were not convinced, having seen the GCC lines almost empty while ours stretched far beyond the easy sign of visibility. Still no one realized that these arrangements were not just for the airport. We also had to live among others even when we were inside Dubai, segregated from our Emirati hosts. There is no formal law that bans the mixing of nationalities and ethnicities as those, which sanction the congregating of men and women in the same space. Yet, this de facto segregation is accepted as the norm.

Going through the Dubai airport on arrival is not a hassle as it is when leaving the country. As expected, airport officials and staff members are trained to be alert for potential false documents and are thus urged to be more careful with Africans. As many times as when I departed through Dubai airport, officials have made me feel as if my passport photo did not exactly look like me. Even with female immigration officers, the encounter, of which one might have expected to be more empathetic to these concerns about profiling or segregating, their lack of confidence in these matters was disturbing. Perhaps, they were wary about not appearing to take liberties with these strict procedures at passport control. If a female immigration agent were inspecting my passport, she would call another officer to have a look.

I wondered how the brokers managed with these women because every time I tried a smile the officer never smiled but instead just called a group of others—almost always male—to check and be sure. If the second person she called was another woman then, of course, there would be a third and even a fourth person to be called. The only truth I found in the brokers' customary advice was that no Emirati woman actually looked straight into a man's eyes. Even a second or third officer would not do it but one could easily see the individual totally perplexed about making a final call on identification on her own—and then only with a male officer to confirm.

Many of my African friends had similar experiences so they advised anyone whose documents were legal and in order, he should just avoid the female officers' line. Once a female officer queried my passport photo, as she looked at me once and then at the photo several times as if she was revising her book notes. I asked her to call any of her other colleagues to help her. "*Leish*?" she asked rudely and stamped my passport without another glance. I realized she never wanted to look like somebody who required assistance in carrying out her job responsibilities.

However, flying through Sharjah was another hassle, especially when I would modify my visit visas to Kish or Oman. We were bundled into a small room, and told to wait. Only Africans were detailed. There would be the usual security routines—the eye test, the full-body scanner, pat-downs, etc.—and often we were asked to repeat the procedures several times. There also would be rapid-fire questions:

What were you doing in Kish? Why did you go there? Do you have friends there? Do you have a job in Dubai?

Whenever a three-month visa expired in Dubai one had to go out of the country to apply for another visa. Kish, an island in Iran, often was the best inexpensive alternative for those who did not want to go home. The island, just an hour's flight from Dubai, is also visa free.

One learns quickly to avoid Sharjah because of such inane questions and procedures.

Getting a Dubai visa in most countries comes through the black market, unlike other countries where one could go to an embassy or consulate, submit a passport and other documents and obtain a quick assessment for visa eligibility. Dubai visas are obtained from tourist or cargo shipping companies but not diplomatic missions. Unlike the European and American countries whose citizens can get a visa on arrival at the airport, citizens of other countries—especially, Asians, Arabs and Africans—have to obtain the visa in their home country before arriving at the airport. A 72-hour transit visa can only be secured at the airport even for Africans but one also needs to have evidence of a hotel booking and a return ticket date marked within three days of arrival.

The two-week visa that most traders in Africa buy is given at 500 *dirhams* (US$150). Such a visa is too short for a meaningful stay to help a job seeker. The only conceivable visa for someone looking for employment is a tourist visa or one that lasts one to two months. Some of these visas can be renewed for an extra month for 500 *dirhams* and it is this visa that is popular in the black market. It's the same type of visa that Ssaka cheated me on and many others have been tricked with by unscrupulous agents or job brokers. Few official tour or travel companies offer such visas so they are mostly prepared by private individuals using the sponsorship (*Kafaala*) system. This is the immigration system used in all GCC countries. Any visitor or tourist from less fortunate countries must have a local citizen sponsoring his stay in the country. Otherwise, it is nearly impossible to obtain a visa.

Some African or Asian middleman locates an Emirati citizen who acts as a sponsor for expatriates. The problem with this visa is that even tourist that cannot get one easily. Naturally, there is an exaggerated fee for this visa. The visa itself normally costs 275 *dirhams* (US$45) but tourism offices in Africa and other Asian countries offer it, starting around 1,700 *dirhams* (US$500) for men and women and rising often to between 2,500 and 3,000 *dirhams* (US$700-US$800). The going rate for women is obviously much higher, because many tourism and travel entities believe they are going to make big fortunes from the sex-starving men in the Emirates.

REPORTING FROM DUBAI

Chapter 26

I walked through *The Gulf Today* offices a few weeks before by my visa expired in June of 2004 and efforts to find jobs had been fruitless. I talked to the editor-in-chief on the phone at the reception desk with the Iraqi security guard watching over me. Fortunately, as I explained earlier, the editor asked me to come up to his office to discuss the internship opening even though I was looking for a full-fledged reporting or section editing position. Although I had studied print journalism at university, I had never been in any newsroom. I also had a solid command of Arabic and he asked if I had worked previously in an Arabic radio station. I was honest and I answered, "no," hoping that my sincerity would be enough to mask my desperation to find a suitable job before my visa expired. He asked me to translate copy and apparently I did it well enough to convince Mr. Anand to hire me as a reporter instead of as just an intern. The news so overjoyed me that I almost went down to kiss his feet. He told me the salary and I had no idea just how small it seemed at that time, but at least it was a standard wage, as all reporters received the same pay. At least, I knew it was not based on any prejudice. I thanked him like a humble son appreciating a dad's gift.

On my return, before I had arrived at my shared accommodation, I had already sent a phone message to my mother's neighbor announcing that I had landed a job. Mummy did not have a phone then and a week later she went to an office of her young brother—my Uncle Kizito Mohammed—and wrote an email with the subject heading: "From your mother." She wrote it in Luganda with phrases such as, "*Munange weyisse bulungi*," (translated as: "My dear, behave well; respect your bosses; be polite and patient). She was writing to me as if I was still a pupil in secondary school.

My first article at *The Gulf Today* was about a Ugandan woman who killed her male companion in a Deira inn near Nasser Square. The woman apparently squabbled with the man, a colleague accompanying her on a business trip, and as she pushed him away the man fell and died from a blunt-force head injury. The woman claimed her actions were in self-defense, identifying the man as her husband and saying that he was trying to force sexual relations

on her without a condom. Police discovered that the man was HIV-positive but the woman was not. I also learned from contacts in the Ugandan community that the victim was married to another woman in Uganda and the woman, who was working in one of Uganda's biggest telecommunication companies, was married to another man and was pregnant at the time of the assault.

The victim's family, including his wife, came to Dubai, with documents from the Ugandan government in hand, to claim the body. Apparently, the deceased was from the Ugandan president's tribe, a connection that justified extra privileges for immediate diplomatic assistance from the home government, even despite the fact that the man was HIV-positive. The story included several follow-ups, which pleased my editors who were quite happy to have an African reporter in hand who also had excellent contacts in Dubai's African community.

After about two months, I realized that because I could read and understand Arabic and the other reporters were Indian who spoke no or little of the language, I used my linguistic advantage to pursue some good Arabic stories. My first target was the Dubai police but to my surprise no one spoke the classical Arabic I knew. After minutes of grumbling with the police guard an Emirati woman official greeted me with, "*Kaifak haluka*," a phrase I understood but with the comprehension one might expect from a nursery school kid. As she tried her best also to speak classical Arabic, she explained to the guard what I wanted and they showed me through with directions I never grasped, but I understood that I was being led to the police's media office.

The ploy worked well because I was able to write up quite a few police stories that earned me a byline in the newspaper, which helped when critics turned to my poor writing. Copies of my work had always been given to Anand the editor-in-chief, who asked the newsroom superiors to give me time, as it was my first journalism job. When I filed a story that was a possible page one piece, he summoned me to his office, which made me quite nervous. We went through the story word by word, noting the grammar and punctuation problems and he stressed that he never wanted to see similar deficiencies in my future work. He encouraged me to read a lot of articles, novels, and grammar books to ensure that my

English writing skills improved. He told me that, all along, he had been patient with my poor writing because he wanted to see me learn first what to do as a reporter. Now, he was telling me, I had to think more extensively about polishing my writing. He said he would be monitoring me on a weekly basis to see the improvement I hopefully would make. The summons to his office had made its deep impression upon me.

About two months later, an office assistant came to my desk, indicating that Mr. Anand wanted to see me. I could feel a flurry of butterflies in my stomach. He waved me to sit as he finished his phone call in Arabic, the first time I had seen my Indian boss speak fluent classical Arabic. He then turned to me with a faint smile; the sort when a father noticed the son he had summoned was terrified. He immediately put me at ease, saying this day's summons was good news.

He had an assignment that he believed I was the best person to chase because I had cultivated good contacts with the police. He wanted me to go to the Dubai women prison and talk to prisoners about their life behind bars. He was mostly interested in prisoners with children—he called them the "innocent inmates." He asked for my opinion about getting a photographer to take shots of the women but I thought this was impossible in the UAE. He insisted that he had seen other Arabic newspapers carrying inmate stories with photos, and said it was all about convincing my contacts that the story was for good intentions on both sides. I had until the end of the week to figure out the logistics for the story. At least I knew his door was always open if I needed any help.

I talked about the story idea with the police media coordinator who advised I write a letter with all details and questions about how the interviews would proceed, which he would then forward to the director of rehabilitation and the correctional department. A week later I visited the correctional facilities with a photographer who had orders not to capture the inmates' faces in the images. I interviewed Major Fauzia Mahmoud Al Mulla, the director of female prisons and talked to three other female inmates including one who had just given birth a few months before. The story turned out to be a long feature, starting on page one and jumping over to the third.

The onus was on convincing the police officials that the story was going to be positive. A prisoner in Dubai had little recourse in refusing any demand from a police official, even if the request was to speak to a reporter. But I also found some female prisoners more than willing to speak and have their voice out they thought had been silenced, talk about their ordeals. The female prison director watched closely as they spoke to me and asked me later to delete some of their comments, something, in hindsight, I regretted doing.

Chapter 27

I was in Mombasa—the second largest city in Kenya and East Africa—for my annual vacation where I had gone to see Abdullah, an old friend, when I received a letter from Bikram Vohra, the editor-in-chief of the *Bahrain Tribune*, who was interested in hiring me. It had been a year and a half since I joined *The Gulf Today*, undoubtedly a good learning experience but which came with an income that could only afford a modest bed space in a room shared with friends and strangers. I always was looking for ideal accommodations.

The letter surprised me because I did not apply for a job in Bahrain. In fact, it had not even crossed my mind that I should go to any other Arab country beside Dubai. Of course, I knew Bikram, as I had asked him for a job when he was editor of *The Evening Post* during my first days in Dubai. He had asked me to first attest the legitimacy of my certificates, though I had no idea he was in Bahrain after *The Evening Post* had ceased publication. Now the same man was offering to recruit me with an offer that was just a few thousand more from what I was getting at *The Gulf Today*. I hesitated to respond immediately, deciding that a night's sleep would help me clarify my options. The next day I responded, indicating that I couldn't relocate to another country with just a few thousands' difference as the only motivating factor.

Before I left the Mombasa Internet Café where I had dispatched my response to the offer, there was a reply. He mentioned that accommodations and cost of living was cheaper in Bahrain than in Dubai, and that I could afford my own house and some savings with the offer. He read effectively between the lines obviously, sensing my anxious desire for a home of my own. Perhaps he knew all too well the tensions one has in sharing tight quarters or annoying roommates who procrastinate or fail to pay their share of the rent. Bikram was an effective salesman because I decided to accept the offer. As soon as my holiday ended, I would resign my position in Dubai.

I wondered how Mr. Anand, my mentor for the last year and a half, had become more than just a boss to me. He had been on my side when I needed a job, when the editors queried my copy,

when I got stuck in Delhi and even in personal situations when I needed a salary advance, an extension of my vacation or the need to use some sick days. He took the news fairly well actually, just wondering if, as a friend, I would share with him details about the offer Bikram had extended to me. I did and he sent me off with the best of wishes. Indeed, Mr. Anand was a man of his word.

Arriving at Bahrain's International Airport in April 2007 I was still not sure if I had made the right decision about leaving Dubai. The paper had booked for me ten days' accommodation at Bahrain International Hotel. From the hotel I called the office to know if there was a driver available to take me to the newspaper offices and meet the editor. First mistake. There were no drivers as with *The Gulf Today*. The editor came online and suggested I hire a cab.

I was the only Arabic speaking reporter at the local news desk, so I was assigned to cover the Bahrain parliament, which met twice every week, as well as come up with other story ideas. I attended the editorial meeting every morning, which was chaired by the senior reporter whose role was more akin to a local editor. He needed three story ideas from everyone to be filed that day—not necessarily the easiest task for a newcomer like me. At *The Gulf Today*, we were expected to pitch just one story idea each day. On days when parliament was in session, I had no problem with pitching ideas. Easily, there were five or more possible stories to be pitched on those days. However, on the other days I fumbled. I would consult the Arabic press early in the morning to get ideas or see any missed story I could do as a follow-up piece.

Every evening after the daily copy budget meeting I had to translate press releases from government departments along with stories from other Arabic papers that we had missed in our coverage. The work was exhausting. One translated story was especially problematic, concerning the head of the Al Wefaq opposition party being denied entry into Kuwait at the airport. He had accused the Bahrain government for initiating deportation. The reporter of the Arabic paper, which ran the original story, got into trouble with the ministry of interior. And, now the *Bahrain Tribune* faced similar treatment, which was confirmed after the story ran the next day.

At the end of my first month in Bahrain I realized my mistake in leaving Dubai. Unlike in Dubai where there were some Ugandans who spoke Luganda and talked about home, there was no time for such pleasantries. Bahrain was about work and sleep and little else. My colleagues in the office used to laugh at me, often saying, "We are all trying to go to Dubai and you are leaving Dubai for Bahrain?" After getting my monthly salary I asked Ismael Numba to find a trusted broker who could secure a visit visa to Dubai for me to look for employment. I realized I was more homesick in Bahrain than I had been in Dubai.

Chapter 28

Back in Dubai, I went to the media city campus to distribute my resumes to any media house that would hire me. One media boss tipped me off about a new television station that was doing local news—City 7 TV. In May of 2007, I walked into the TV studios in the Associated Press building in media city, already thinking of the sort of effective bait that had helped me in my previous job searches. I told the news editor (Mr. Kurt) that I wanted to work for him for a full month without pay covering Dubai police, civil defense and any other assigned department he saw fit. As I reached for a resume in my satchel, he waved it away and instead asked when I could report for my first day on free duty.

On my first day I had planned to go to the Dubai police media office to tell them I now was working with a TV news organization, but in the meantime I got a tip that there was a building in Al Qouz that had collapsed, killing two workers on site. I told the editor who gave me a cameraman and we hurried to the scene. I knew there would be resistance from the police on filming so I told my cameraman to do our first filming inside our car from a distance and then give me the film to hide it. Then we tried our luck to film outside but as soon as he exited the van and the police saw him, he was stopped and asked to hand over the camera with its film. I tried to plead to the police but it was useless, as the cop was getting his orders on a phone and removed the tape as he talked. After they took the tape, we were given the camera and escorted out of the construction premises with a police patrol. Regardless, we had a story and some good footage that I had managed to hide. The story ran for at least two days with updates on the injured but using the same footage. My editor was impressed.

That same week I went to a Dubai police presser regarding the arrest of Nigerian drug traffickers. On the sidelines of the presser I asked the police commander (Lt. Gen. Dhahi Khalfan) to speak on camera regarding the growing numbers of thefts of women's handbags at Dubai nightclubs. He said police were investigating some women handbag snatches and advised women not to drink so much to lose control of their belongings in a

nightclub. That story topped the news, outdoing the drug trafficking presser story. The video editor used some footage of people dancing in one nightclub and showed images of some handbags left unattended in the same club.

At the end of the week the assignment editor invited me outside near a small tree where he took his regular smoking breaks. He went straight to the point: My first week of work had been excellent and he was impressed. He said he was giving me the job with immediate effect and my contract starting date was retroactive to the first day I worked. We agreed on a salary and he asked me to bring my documents and passport copies the following week for a visa process.

"There was a problem," I explained. "I was still under a six-month ban from working anywhere imposed by my former employer Dar Al Khaleej, the publisher of *The Gulf Today* newspaper." The company always imposed a ban on any expatriate who resigned. It was a common policy exploited by most UAE companies to inhibit the mobility of expatriates from one job to another, a good method to also keep one at a low-paying job.

Mr. Kurt already knew about the ban policy, as there were some companies that could manipulate it or who had very powerful local people or sheikhs who could secure a visa even with the ban. Unfortunately, the TV station had no such options to explore. However, he said I was too good to be let go so he would offer a freelance contract and ask the company to offer a visit visa good until when my ban expired and I would be free to sign a permanent contract.

I covered labor strikes, major accidents, fires, and press conferences—far more breadth and depth of story possibilities than what I struggled to find in my newspaper work. What made me so proud was that my bosses from all levels—news producer, editor, and even the CEO—acknowledged me so often for the work. I also did some political stories, including when the Dubai Road toll "SALIK" launched and I interviewed the head of Sharjah police patrol unit (*Anjad*). The story could not have been timed better as the Sultan Al Junaidi talked about the mess of Dubai's traffic and how it had impacted Sharjah's roads and how the government had

been caught unprepared for this. I also interviewed Major General Mohammed Al Marri, the director of Dubai naturalization and residency department at the time, when the UAE gave amnesty to all illegal residents to travel out of the country.

Unfortunately, my good days in City 7 were numbered, as my six months' visa ban was ready to expire when Mohiudin Bin Hendi, the station's top executive, convened a meeting with all staff members. He announced a ban covering all political stories saying that he never wanted to clash with the country's leadership. He was instructing with immediate effect an end to police, court, or other politically related stories and said the television operation remained a going business. From here on out, we were only supposed to cover business-related stories and all non-business reporters that still wanted a job with the television station had to start making business contacts. A week later the British CEO was replaced with an Indian CEO (Mr. Roy). Within a few weeks, men like Peter, Kurt, and other Brits who had become quite friendly colleagues were replaced with new editors and producers, now mostly Indian. The Arab woman who worked as human resources manager also was replaced and now I had to start again explaining to the new HR executive how my contract had come to be a freelance agreement and the promise of upgrading my visa to a full-time residency after six months. The only Indian female reporter on staff, with whom I had collaborated on a few stories, was appointed as the chief news editor. The only management posts unchanged were of the two Indian accountants.

My visit visa had earlier been prepared by the television station's parent—the Bin Hendi Company—as there were restrictions for the companies registered in Dubai's media city free zones concerning the process for applying for visit visas. In the meantime I wrote to the HR executive of Bin Hendi informing him that my visa was expiring soon and as they have done before they should get me a new visa before I go to Kish for the change. The HR executive had to consult my bosses and the letter ended up on the desk of the new CEO. The new HR person at the television station immediately summoned me, asking why I had contacted the other management offices without their knowledge. He lectured

me in his small office that they were two distinct managements and warned that my actions could have repercussions as the CEO was unhappy with my actions.

When I left his office, and returned to my desk in Media City I found a letter on my email from the editor relieving me of City 7 duties and asking me to proceed to the accountant to get all my pending payments. It was a start of a six-month unemployment time in Dubai. I prepared my own visit visa and went to Oman instead of Kish for the change of status.

Chapter 29

I had to start my job hunt as soon as I returned from Oman and my first destination was the *Khaleej Times* in November of 2007. I talked to the local editor at the time, an Indian woman whom I met during a previous assignment and again at a British Council media workshop in Dubai. She said she was surprised to learn that I was leaving City 7 television, adding that the station had just hired one of the best CEOs in the TV world and if I stayed there my career would be on a rise. I never wanted to tell her that I was actually fired, as that would have been a bad precedent for an anxious job seeker. She promised to check back after one week and the familiar routine started anew: "Check with me in three days, I will call you, next week, we are hiring next month, etc."

Meanwhile, I tried other newspapers and media houses but none offered hope. I returned to *Khaleej Times* and started talking with editors of other departments. I talked to the business section editor who was at least polite in his refusal: "I don't want to waste your time, Yasin. We have no openings for reporters; we actually don't need many."

There was one open door. In the *City Times* tabloid offices where I landed temporarily I found a Kenyan woman in her mid-thirties working as a sub-editor. I felt some relief, thinking that she should be able to help somehow. However she responded to all my "his" and "hullos" with a demeaning silence signaling the unmistakable message: She never wanted to be seen getting close in any way to a struggling African boy.

However, on some mornings without anyone else in office, she would exchange a few words in Swahili with me, describing her work on her master's degree at a prestigious British university in the Knowledge Village and how she would quit her job as soon as she finished her coursework. I just wanted to know if she could give a word with the editor to have me fully on board—something she was reluctant to do. When the other staff members streamed into the office she would return to her original demeaning silence even when I had an important work-related question in English. She would only talk to me when no one else was in the office, the logic of which has baffled me until today.

At the tabloid, I pursued story lines that no other staff members had considered and I would have approximately three stories published every week. I had some advantage of Arabic so I occasionally concentrated on getting entertainment news from Arabic contacts but even then things were so slow by the end of each month the pay was not even enough to cover the cost for my bed space.

I was seriously underemployed and Imad, my flat boss, at least understood this and waited. He always gave me a lift to and from my office as he worked in Al Qouz Industrial area where the newspaper had its offices. If I had an assignment to chase I typically relied upon bus transportation. I had to continue working hard to stay in the news business, maintain my contacts and establish a foothold in different reporting beats. I would go to many press conferences—even if it were just ordinary local news—whenever I had time though I had nowhere to publish the stories. It was my novel form of networking and I would send these independent stories to the Abu Dhabi paper that was about to be launched.

After about three months at *Khaleej Times*, Mr. Taj, a senior translator from Sudan who became my friend, talked to Myra, the *City Times* editor for the main publication, about hiring me. Gitta, who edited the tabloid, reiterated her original declaration that the only openings they had were for freelancers but she promised to talk to Myra about hiring me for the main newspaper. A few days later, Myra offered to give me some assignments on a trial basis, and two of my stories that week went on the front page but without my byline. Myra insisted that even though the tabloid had carried my bylines, she was not going to use my name in the main paper until she was fully satisfied she needed me. I worked with Myra for about three weeks, and even those on the desk were surprised why it was so hard for her to hire me. All my stories were being published though with no bylines and sub-editors said I wrote better copy than other Arabic language reporters. When she suddenly decided to hire me, I was a week taken. My childhood friend who worked with the *Khaleej Times* in Ras Al Khaimah would later tell me that whenever he met the paper's senior editors they regretted having missed hiring me and blamed Myra for playing an inept game of office politics. The *Khaleej Times* editors admired my stories while I was at *The National* and they were disappointed that Myra had not hired me.

Chapter 30

During most of my freelance time at *Khaleej Times* I also asked the editors of the soon-to-be-launched Abu Dhabi paper, as it was known then, to hire me. However, I now had to change strategy, as I realized my asking for a job in Dubai or Abu Dhabi was futile because this new publication—rumored to be paying double what other papers were paying—nabbing media professional placements in the two big emirates was highly competitive. I wrote another letter to the editors explaining to them how I was the best person to cover the northern Emirates of Sharjah and Ajman. I mentioned knowing every person in the Sharjah's police operations room and the director was a good friend who assisted me on exclusive stories, which I shared with my potential employers. I also explained how I had other good contacts in municipalities, hospitals and other government departments, again offering my clips to assure that I would beat all the competition in covering various emirates.

Finally, one day I got a reply on one of my stories I had just sent when Matt Slater, a local news editor, wanted to meet me in his Abu Dhabi office.

To be sincere I did not even have enough money to take me to Abu Dhabi at that time. As I passed the reception desk, I asked a Kenyan receptionist to secure me 100 *dirhams* because I had an emergency but would repay it the following day. It was a bizarrely brazen step because we had never talked much and we were not even friends. But unlike the other Kenyan woman in the office, this one always responded to my greetings whenever I passed by her desk. With no hesitation, she reached into her handbag and pulled out two fifty-*dirham* notes and handed them to me.

In Abu Dhabi, Slater called his deputy editor Gregg Frey to join him as they showed me around the newsroom, and then we went to the canteen. I thought he was going to order some drinks but he just asked how much I wanted to take a job with them. I suggested a figure but he reduced it by a few thousands, a good enough offer for me to accept and with that we returned to the newsroom to discuss assignments. The offer was about a 120-percent increase of what I had earned at my first job at *The Gulf Today*

and about 30 percent more than what I got at City 7 TV. Thinking back, it was hard to consider what we earned at *The Gulf Today* as a salary. My Indian colleagues at the paper used to call it "pocket money" and the job as "training." We joked about being grateful to the paper's owners for both training and paying us.

We examined a map of the UAE, as he indicated five emirates that he wanted me to cover for the newspaper: Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, Umm Al Quwain, and Ras Al Khaimah. He assigned all of the northern Emirates to me. He explained that he might not want me to file a story from each emirate every day but the responsibility of keeping an eye to any news development worthy of coverage in any of them was on me. He also warned that he never wanted me to miss any good story in any of these emirates or to be scooped by any other paper. If I was unsure of the newsworthiness of any story I should ask the assignment desk but missing a story that should have been covered was unforgivable.

Two days later I was on duty, excited and humbled for the offer that finally came after six months of unemployment. The news of my hiring traveled fast among my journalist colleagues and many just called from the air to say *Mabrouk* (congratulations). I could sense many could not understand how I had managed to get into the Abu Dhabi paper and were wondering about whom I contacted. That evening I also got a call from the *Khaleej Times* human resources office asking me to come in and sign my contract offer. The coincidence was not lost on me but I did not hesitate to say no, as I had worked with them for more than six months, and they had politicized the process so much. I just excused the caller, indicating I was already working somewhere.

My first week at *The National* in Abu Dhabi was a really busy one, as I had to establish contacts with every department in my areas as well as ensure I pitched a good story every day. I woke up early in the morning to visit three municipal departments, talk to their public relations representatives and leave my contact information before returning in the midday to work exclusively on the day's copy.

I was supposed to work at home, so I had to make my own private arrangements of somewhere I could sit to write my stories besides my living quarters. I went to *Al Ittihad*, a sister Arabic newspaper office in Sharjah, which waved me inside without any delay.

Striking workers were among the main news stories that time, and almost every day there was a strike somewhere but a labor dispute during my second week at *The National* garnered me attention from my colleagues and editors. Police had arrested about thirty striking laborers during a sit-in at a skyscraper and I had managed to take photos with my flip-phone camera from a position high above the scene. The story played so well that I was nominated to be among the journalists featured on the newspaper's promotional launch video.

Two days later I got the script of Ajman that I was to represent in the video, and decided that I easily could memorize it as I had committed to memory several parts of the Quran. I figured one paragraph of copy would be extremely easy to commit to memory even with my normal daily workload. But when the cameras started rolling something went wrong. It was my first time on camera and I couldn't do the script. The cameraman calmed me, encouraging me to try several times until I managed to get through it without errors. Yet, the image was less than flattering, of a nervous black man struggling to speak an English-language script. The video did enhance my popularity in the newspaper not because I had done it well but because of my memorable nervous appearance in front of the camera.

Another story that made me popular in my early days at *The National* concerned the Dubai arrests of corporate executives including Zack Shahin of the Dubai Islamic bank. I got most of the tips for these stories from a CID friend source at the Dubai police headquarters. Every day I called him to see if another banker had been arrested and he was kind enough to give the names of who had been arrested as desired. I could call the paper, tell them another man had been arrested and give his name. That was all I had to do as a business reporter—dig into the man's background, write up a sidebar profile, and my story along with his would be run with shared bylines. We always got the news first while other papers and wires did the follow-ups. With the arrests of individuals in this banking scandal, I had managed five page-one stories.

Chapter 31

It was not until a few months into my new reporting gig that I managed to get feedback on my work from one of the big bosses at the paper. I had just visited the office to pick up a letter for my wife's visa to take to immigration. I had to forget the taxi outside and sit until my meeting with the deputy editor was over. It lasted for about twenty minutes and he came out, shook my hands and said all he wanted was to thank me for the great work I was doing in the Northern Emirates.

The local news editor was also equally surprised with my ability for coverage. He once asked how I could afford to be in Sharjah and Ras Khaimah (also informally known as RAK) at once when the story happens at the same time. "I mean something is happening in Sharjah at the same time another is happening in RAK but you have both two stories," he said.

I replied without rethinking my answer. "You said you would only pay me for doing something others could not do and that is one of them."

But what really happened those days was something quite stressful. I could get calls from media executives in three emirates—all calling me for a press conference or a story tip in RAK at the same time I was doing a presser in Sharjah. So often I would depend on a phone that I would ask a PR rep in RAK to email me the release or ask a source in Umm Al Quwain to wait for my callback so I could get the details. Days liked these often ended with me giving more than two stories and only one would get published. It was quite a load I had taken on but what always made me happy was that my bosses were appreciative and unlike before I finally had enough money to spend on my family.

When Gregg Fray took over from Matt Slater, he was as strong an ally for me as his predecessor. He helped on some personal matters, like when he realized that I was on a very low staff grade that did not even get a furniture allowance while everyone else at the desk had one. He said, "What grade is that when even all photographers and typists are entitled to a furniture allowance?" He took up the case to change my grade and arrange a furniture allowance.

Later on, a female reporter from a rival paper called, telling me she had seen my salary. "Why did you have to accept the lowest

salary of all the people in the paper?" she asked. I was not sure about what she was talking about, until she explained that the newspaper's staff salaries had been leaked on the Internet, which she shared via email.

I went through everyone's pay info on the link and my heart sunk to learn that of all staff—editors and reporters, photographers and graphic designers, administrators and typists—I was the least paid and by a wide margin, almost half of what some fellow reporters were getting. I thought about the load I had at the paper and admitted nothing haunted me at the paper as much as the pay I was getting compared to all other employees.

One day when one of my cluster editors demanded on the phone that he had sent me an email several hours earlier and demanded that I should have a Blackberry to check my email wherever I am like everyone else, I politely replied with a question that made him laugh.

"Why should I be like everyone when I am not paid like everyone?"

In the UAE, pay is based on one's country of origin and, at times, the color of one's skin. It is an established fact here that the British earn the most generous pay followed by their American brothers, and Arabs in third. Indians and Africans often get the least.

More than a year after the paper's launch, both local editors resigned, making way for a new tough boss and his deputy, who preferred to be called by their initials. Let's call them, respectively: Tough Local Editor (TLE) and his deputy (DLE). The new editor started his tenure by discussing everyone's work one-on-one along with the instruction that everyone would attach all source and news contacts to email correspondence. It was clear from his meetings he had come to turn the sky upside down.

Chapter 32

I was attending an Ajman municipal international urban planning conference for the area's waterfront, a story idea welcomed by the editors. They gave some instructions on nailing down details costs, architects and plans for a page lead story of about 650 words. During the media event, I overheard journalists talking about breaking news concerning a Palestinian man who had lost two sons of triplets due to pesticide poisoning. Suddenly, we all bolted from the presser and dashed to police and hospital sources to confirm the news. I called Ali, the Dubai Bureau Chief at the time, to inform him of the news and that I was chasing it instead of the conference. He said while he thought the breaking news item was worthy of coverage he still insisted that the waterfront story was a priority for the day's copy budget, which already had been scheduled to run.

We found the Palestinian man's family at Sheikh Khalifa Hospital, and they were disturbed beyond words. Two sons had died and their third daughter was still in intensive care battling for her life. The parents and their grandmother were vomiting as well and were sick enough to be hospitalized. The father (Hassan El Bakari) offered to talk to us about a pesticide company that came to spray in their neighboring flat. The Nigerian family in the flat had been asked to vacate its quarters for some time but the neighbors had not been warned. Residue from the pesticide had spread to his flat and the family members became ill.

It was a big story to me by all means, as every Arabic reporter who was at the municipal presser was now chasing the story. We talked to some doctors and then rushed to Ajman police, where we had to wait for a couple of hours to get comments from the police chief who was away from the office at the time. I told my colleagues that I still had to file the waterfront story, and one murmured to me that it should be forgotten because this family's story was a much more significant one. I tried to convince them that my editor was insisting the former story assignment remained a priority. The reporter from *Al Ittihad* intervened. "*The National* has more than thirty reporters," he said. "What are they doing to have you chasing two big stories at one time?"

I had no response then and cared not to respond. Meanwhile, we finalized our investigations at the municipality by the middle of the afternoon and all of us rushed to our respective offices to write copy. Ali called me again to check on the waterfront story. I told him I could make just 250 words or less on that because I had not yet talked to engineers or officials for comments and follow-up details. I just had something from the municipality's press release, and, for sure, I did not have enough time to find answers to all the desk questions, I explained. He was upset and his tone was rude, as he asked if I still wanted to work for *The National*.

Minutes after filing the two stories, my cluster editor at the time (Anthony) wrote an email, copying all others editors on it:

> *Yasin,*
>
> *It is very, very important that you actually listen when Ali or I brief you on a story and that you then act on our instructions. Today, Ali could not have made it any clearer what we were looking for from this story, but you completely missed the point.*
>
> *If a story is not working out the way we expected you MUST let us know immediately.*
>
> *From now on, we will be calling you at least once per hour to find out how a story is progressing.*
>
> *Thanks,*

I replied, indicating Ali had been rude to me and because I had explained to professional satisfaction why I was abandoning the original story I thought he was just bullying. The incident became a battle, with Ali replying this time in a private email not copied to any other editors. Another desk editor also wrote me a private email apologizing about the mini-brouhaha and saying that my story about the triplets was going on the front page. He also explained that Ali was under pressure from the new senior editor to present the waterfront story originally assigned to me. The editor closed his email with: "He is a decent man; don't hate him."

A day later, another email from above came to all of us, indicating that we should report only to our cluster editors, and the announcement from the new editor also made it clear that Ali was

not the point person in the Dubai office but was instead a bureau chief. A week later another assignment brought yet another round of wrath from the new editor. The story was about the opening of a new primary health care center in Umm Al Quwain.

yasin,

please do not do this ever again!

we had no idea this story was coming from you and it is worth a brief and no more.

you have now wasted all that time writing a story that is going to appear in the paper as 80 words!

why would you do this?

you are a valuable member of my team but you waste too much time writing silly stories.

from now one, before you write a story you will send anthony an e-mail. if you do not do this I will call you

do you understand? are we clear?

TLE

Now if I thought Ali's tone was bullying this new editor's email had made Ali's look like a love letter. The story would only make a brief if it was opening in Abu Dhabi but in Umm Al Qawain where there was only one hospital and women seeking medical treatment for labor pains or other conditions were being transferred consistently to other emirates because the emirate's only hospital was full or had no alternate facilities.

The editor's perspective had been severely narrowed by his Abu Dhabi environment, believing that everything was good and the same in the whole UAE just as it seemed in Dubai but that certainly was not the case. A new health facility was big news to the people of Umm Al Quwain and all Emirate papers covering it were giving the story a lot of feature color with extensive background about the emirate's general health problems, issues and concerns.

I never responded to his email but the next day he had another email. Before sharing the email, I should offer a bit of context. Dubai was always considered priority but the founding agenda of *The National* newspaper also was focused on giving more coverage to Abu Dhabi, the overshadowed capital. The paper would

consider more Abu Dhabi stories but still this did not help the small northern Emirates that I covered.

yasin,

please do not write anything until you first speak with your cluster editor

please respond to this e-mail and tell me you understand what i am asking

also, on page four of gulf news today, they have a great story about a woman who may soon be executed. could you follow that and file on it when there is a new development?

again, please let me know you have received this e-mail and you understand

thanks,

TLE

This time I replied this with only two words: "*yes, sir*."

Within four months of the new editor's takeover I looked through the Dubai office staff roster and found that I was the only reporter who was hired at the time of the paper's launch who was still working there. True, some of them had resigned when they could not handle the new management's pressure but there also were others who had been fired. Meanwhile, I was doing my MBA with Preston University and I knew all too well the urgency of keeping myself gainfully employed. I thought the City 7 curse of not resolving my differences or disputes with a new management was already haunting me.

Chapter 33

A day after the National Paints' fire—one of the biggest ever registered in Sharjah—I was assigned to do a follow-up piece. I got the message from the deputy news editor—who preferred to be called more casually as "DLE"—asking me to accompany the civil defense director to the scene of the fire, and interview him onsite as well as snap photos.

Now this was one of the biggest jokes I have ever heard from an editor. I was wondering if in the UK they could do this, if they could ask any senior officials simply like this as if they paid them. But any editor—certainly not a newcomer in the UAE—would know what is possible and what is not in the prevailing professional culture. I knew it was not a matter of UAE officials being anti-media but even in my native Uganda one couldn't ask a senior official to return to a fire-damaged site just to pose for photos as if one was staging a model shoot. There was little room to negotiate this matter, unfortunately, so I accepted the request.

At least I was happy he didn't ask if I planned on taking him in my car or his. But seriously, I couldn't make requests to the fire boss and retain his respect so I had to play it well with him. The photographer was already calling, as he wanted the man to be at the scene when he arrived there because he had other deadline assignments—yet another sincere demand. And, after all, he was not the one to drag the man, his task was only to take the photos and vanish. My first prayers were to let the civil defense director be at the fire scene or if he was planning on departing for the scene within a short while. I called him and he already had been on scene in the morning and had returned to his office.

"Feel free to pass along here, Yasin," he said. At that point, it was nine thirty in the morning, some ninety minutes after the civil defense director was on the fire scene. He was one of the friendlier officials in Sharjah who spoke to the press freely. I arrived at his office at around ten fifteen when the photographer called that he was on the scene and wanted to take the boss's photos.

I said casually, "By the way, Colonel, I have my photographer at the scene and we thought we could take a photo of you there. Is there any senior officer at the site that he can take pictures of instead?"

He replied, "I don't ask people to be in pictures; he can negotiate with anyone at the site himself or take general pictures of firefighters cooling the premises." This sounded like a reasonable option.

I went to the site, and rumors were rife that one worker had died in the blaze. A Ugandan woman working for a UAE exchange branch within the neighborhood where National Paints was located told me an Indian man at her office said that his brother, a firefighter, was missing. I interviewed the office personnel but all her colleagues could say was the Indian man was there, but none had taken his phone number. I asked the civil defense authorities about the missing man, but they said there were no fatalities. I asked National Paints directors and they replied similarly that they had accounted for their employees.

Meanwhile, I told my editors about the conflicting information and they advised me to keep an eye on it but it would not be a story for the day's publication except if officials were able to confirm casualties.

Not until three months after the blaze, the body was found at the scene as the workers resumed cleaning the gutted premises. The shocked workers who saw the human bones in one of the oil tanks transmitted the information rapidly, and the good Ugandan woman who had tipped me off earlier called me immediately to let me know that police officials were removing the body from the site of the burned plant.

The call came while I was with Ahmed Morsy of *Al Ittihad* in his car chasing some other story and we decided to change direction as soon as I heard the tip. On the way to the National Paints site, I texted the office, and the reply asked for an immediate dispatch of 100 words to put online at the newspaper's web site.

"Listen, I am just going to the scene now, and all I know is from this woman at a nearby office," I replied.

The police already had cordoned off the premises when we arrived and barred us from getting close to the scene. We went to the National Paints offices to inquire why they had lied to us earlier about having all of their staff and employees accounted for, three months earlier. We met the same director from earlier who confirmed this time it was their worker.

Occasionally, editorial decisions frustrated me on stories that I knew were good. One concerned a Nigerian man who had leaped

to his death in the Al Nahda area as he was trying to flee from a man that apparently impersonated an official police authority. Impersonation of policemen was common in the emirate but never had it claimed one's life as in this case. The bogus policeman had fled the scene after the accident and police were already looking for him. After pitching it to my cluster editor, he consulted with his fellow editors and advised me to write up a brief. I had enough information to work up a far more substantive story that promised to investigate more deeply the problems of fake police officers harassing individual citizens and immigrants. However, I felt quite demoralized by my editor's lack of interest in a story with plenty of solid journalistic potential. The brief did not even appear in the paper the next day, which disappointed me greatly.

Beat reporting always has its tensions. Two days later, a rival English paper carried a story about the body of a Belgian man being removed from his apartment by police. I was driving to court when I saw TLE's call, and I knew something had gone wrong because he always makes those morning calls when someone missed a story. I couldn't take the call and waited until after I had parked. He again called and this time I responded.

"Have you seen my mail I sent to you?" he asked.

"Not yet. Am just arriving in court for a story," I replied.

"Okay, listen. KT has a story on a Belgian man found dead in his apartment. How did we miss such a story?"

"I can't tell now. Need to first see the story," I answered.

"Tell me: do you keep contacts with police?" he said, with furor in his voice.

"Of course, I do. I am just sure the story is not from police," I said. However, there was no way I could explain to him that such stories came from secret sources—sometimes I get them and they miss and there should be times when they can also find them and naturally I miss.

He continued, with rising displeasure in his voice. "They quoted some sources from police and if this story is true, you owe me a big explanation. The body is of a European and could become a big story from now. We always have to be on top of this and not be satisfied with follow-ups. Do you understand?"

I was jolted by his rough tone. "I will check my email and get back, sir."

I cancelled the court journey and went to a nearby Internet café to check my email and the KT article on the recovered body. Indeed, the story had been verified but when I called police, they still had not issued any statement. The reporter likely got the tip from her own sources or one of their readers who lived in the neighborhood where the body was found had called the paper.

One of my hospital sources tipped me about the body being removed from the Buhairah corniche. Although the source told me the death was natural and the body was in a morgue at the hospital, the police spokesman confirmed that the police forensic department had the Belgian man's body, not the hospital.

I always pitched every possible news angle for my story ideas and I became increasingly dismayed at how the editors would reject the pitch and then the next day a competing Arabic paper would have it, and the editors decided to forgo even a follow-up. A bigger problem often occurred on the third day of a news event when an English-language paper followed up on a particular story that we ignored, and translated it from an Arabic publication. As expected, my editors wondered how we missed the story and asked me to do an update. I was so disappointed because I had made an aggressive pitch on the first day of the story and now I was relegated to doing a follow-up that did little to burnish an enterprising reporter's reputation. I was surprised that my editors did not understand the peculiar dynamics of getting journalistic scoops in the UAE, where there were plenty of media outlets angling aggressively to one-up each other. The region was tight enough where one reporter could not expect to have each and every story a rival might have. The only way that could be accomplished would require one to infiltrate a competitor's head or hack his emails.

Chapter 34

Reporters had to be quite creative in getting solid story leads in the UAE, especially Sharjah. No official would call to let reporters or the media know if an accident or some visible incident had just occurred. A police press release would always come two or three days after the incident once authorities had finished their investigations. They preferred telling reporters that they had arrested suspects to saying the investigation was continuing, especially if there were no productive leads. Some more established newspapers such as *The Gulf News* and *Khaleej Times* relied on readers' tip but not *The National*.

Nevertheless, I still had a number of exclusive stories and even managed to parlay readers' tips to other newspapers into articles for my own paper. I managed to cultivate secret and off-the-record or deep background sources that truly constituted the lifeblood of an effective, productive journalist working in the UAE. When I started with *The National* I asked an enterprising Arabic reporter about his modus operandi in landing leads. He was kind enough to let me join him on a visit to a local hospital, where he introduced me to a line-staff member. All I had to do was purchase phone credits for the staff member who would obligingly call me whenever he had a tip for a possible story. Of course, I pledged not to share my colleague's trade secrets with anyone else. The tactic worked as the staff member regularly called me anytime a dead or badly injured victim or patient was brought into the hospital wards. My contact shared names and details of accidents or other events that had resulted in such dramatic casualties. With those details in hand, I then could confirm the story with hospital administrators or police or in some instances, go to the patient ward directly. In no time, I had cultivated a network of contacts at hospitals throughout the emirates. It also was worthwhile to make social acquaintances with police and patrol officers, who were happy to share information on the promise that their names would never be revealed. Finding another Arab who had cultivated good police sources on the side immediately cemented the bond of trust and the good thing with police officers was they never needed phone credit cards like hospital staff contacts. Friendship and trust were sufficient. The most

difficult part was ensuring that a source could not be easily swayed to switch allegiances when it came to news scoops and exclusives. Reporters were unabashedly competitive about trying to control sources for their exclusive benefit.

One female reporter of a rival paper gave me a really hard time about identifying my secret sources. The first thing she always did was to persuade my source not to give me or anyone else a story tip again or ignore calls when there was a good breaking story. Some of my male sources fell prey to her machinations but a few also were bold enough to tell me what she was trying to do, as she tried to do with one assignment which lasted a month. For the first few days I had the competitive lead on the story, but then she closed the gap, and soon I found myself out of the information-gathering loop. My editor woke up to read a story in another paper and asked me how I could have missed it. I literally bugged my source incessantly to share some new information, promising not to reveal to anyone—including my rival colleague—that he had given me details. Unfortunately, the next day I discovered he still held back some other details that he only gave to my rival.

No one was immune to the disappointment of missing a story but it was frustrating if the story missed was big. So whenever we met at press conferences every reporter would try to be respectful to the other fearing some day that journalist would have some story too big to be missed. Competition among English papers was fiercer than in Arabic papers, but all reporters regardless of which language they represented were important because every newspaper had morning recaps of all newspapers, including the Arabic ones.

We agreed informally that in the case of a major story—such as an accident with multiple fatalities—we would collaborate on details and information. One still could do his/her own exclusives or research and not be obliged to share but whoever also failed to share the general news that could get anyone in trouble would be isolated. But it also would be a lie to tell if anyone was being truthful or insincere about the time or manner in which they heard of a major story. A story might break in the middle of the night or at a scene close by so punishing those who breached the informal

agreement would be difficult. The fact was each of us still valued the immense professional prize of getting an exclusive scoop. Journalism was as much driven by luck as it was by the earnest enterprise of cultivating sources and gathering information. Undoubtedly, public affairs spokespersons and public relations officials were important, too. Almost all press releases were in Arabic, and most of them were poorly written with even basic information such as the place of accident or time of occurrence missing. There were gaps that no editor would excuse so calling back these PR officers would not be particularly helpful, because they would say that was the only authorized information available. A reporter could press the case that it would be better if an official who was quoted in the release call back directly than to rely solely on the PR officer who had written and issued the press release.

The PR people were also responsible for monitoring the news for any stories about their departments. They would deal with any journalist who wrote anything they didn't want to be released and here is where secret sourcing often got us into trouble. They would demand a direct apology, contact an editor, or, in the worst case, blacklist reporters. Sharjah police, for example, had blacklisted an *Al Ittihad* newspaper reporter for two years and thus this poor reporter depended on me to forward to him every release from the police. It had to be a secret that I forward them or otherwise I risked being blacklisted.

Chapter 35

The irony of journalism demanded something new continuously. When one cannot really find anything new in his head, it's easy to become restless and worried about losing the job. The rule is stark in its simplicity: A reporter either has stories or risks being fired. Writer's block or journalistic blackout could affect me one day every week and I suddenly wondered if I'd ever recover. There was the additional worry of having to pitch three stories at the start of every week, a protocol that TLE had brought to the paper. It was good for reporters with beats that could be predicted with fairly good certainty but problematic for me, especially when the week became much busier with breaking stories. But there were times when it helped, especially on dry days when a pitched story would often go as a lead article and having three leads in a week would just be fine. Six months after the newspaper launched, Anna Zacharias came on board to take over covering Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah and ease my load. She also was responsible for the UAQ though so often the editors sent me to cover stories in that emirate. After staying in Ras Khaimah for about three years, she was moved to Abu Dhabi and I immediately sensed they would again ask me to run for stories in every emirate like a journalistic machine. She already had started forwarding to me press invitations when I replied, asking her kindly not to let the desk consider me as the reporter of all these other emirates. This was a large geographical territory requiring long-distance drives for stories that were never considered in the office.

Her response came in an email:

> *Yeah, I have realized being in Abu Dhabi that everything here is so compact . . . and that is why they always thought that Ajman, Fuj, RAK and Sharjah were suburbs of each other. It's so funny being in AD, just released that they think the whole country is AD, Dubai and Al Ain. Crazies. I really think we should have one reporter in Sharjah, one in Ajman-UAQ, one in Fuj and one in RAK. There is so much news in each of those areas and you have to do so much work covering three emirates!*

One morning I got a call from a PR person who had supplied me with materials for the Al Majjaz project story for publication. He complained that I had written a negative story yet all they expected from our cooperation was for me to write a good story for their project. Like me, he had also not yet read the paper but instead had received a call from his boss and he was on his way to find a copy. He told me the boss was calling an emergency meeting to discuss my story and he believed I would be "screwed."

Ten minutes later, I was driving and he was calling again, and I neglected about five calls and turned my phone to mute. I wanted to have a first chance to see a copy of the published story. At the office, I learned that he had already told one of my colleagues, Tahreer Al Amiri, a reporter at the *Al Ittihad* newspaper, about my story and my reluctance to take his calls. I wondered how many other reporters he had already told that morning that I didn't know. Tahreer advised I immediately call him and try to find a solution because the Sharjah ruler owned the Al Shurooq Company, which was the contractor for the project, and his charges could exert any amount of hell upon me.

As soon as I sat at my desk, he called again and this time I answered.

"Yasin, do you realize that this project is owned by Sheikh Sultan [referring to Sheikh Sultan Al Qassimi, the ruler of Sharjah]. I am just trying to help you but you don't understand this: If I left you to deal with my boss they will definitely deport you."

He continued with his specific demands. He wanted the number of people I had talked to on the story. I knew that he already had called one of my sources, a female government employee.

"You want to threaten them like you are doing to me? Forget it man," I replied.

"You will give them to me once you know who wants them," he responded flatly.

The phone went off and I now had a chance to read the story. It was a small down-pager, not one that the paper had given a lot of prominence but it had a headline that set my head spinning as well:

Buhairah Corniche Roads: From bad to worst

The rest of the copy was not as alarming as the headline itself. I had written about the details of the project, which was a

100-million-*dirham* waterfront investment undertaking, linking the Sharjah Al Majaz Park to Buhairah Corniche. The project involved closing some roads and thus increased traffic pressures on the road detours. By the time I wrote the story construction was just beginning and traffic at the Corniche Road had slowed to a snail's pace. I had talked to some motorists querying the project because of worsening traffic and their remarks were in the story, intended merely as minor contextual details. However, the editor elevated the traffic complaints to become the focal point of the story. After reading it, I queried my editor, who forwarded my query to the desk editors with additions indicating that I thought the re-write desk added some copy in the story. The deputy editor asked me to have the company's people contact him directly, which I did. I don't know what they talked with editors about but they could not stop the PR from bragging to other reporters "if they wanted to know what he can do they should ask Yasin."

Then the opening of Al Majaz project came about two years later. It was on a Monday evening and my editor had asked me to gather all the necessary information, write it up and just update it throughout the night with any changes. I contacted the same PR representative, asking him if a press release was ready and he said they wanted all reporters to publish on that Wednesday. In other words, the release would be ready only a day after the event. I protested the embargo and he remained stubborn. I told my editor who agreed with me about going ahead with the story regardless of the PR rep's instructions.

In the evening when I arrived at the event the same PR guy approached me, reminding that reporters had to obey them because they were working for the ruler [Sheikh Sultan]. He reasoned that if we published ahead of other papers, our competitors would kill the story, believing it had no real immediate news value. I told him I don't make editorial decisions at the paper and I added that if he tried to call in threats as he did with the earlier incident, I would turn my phone off. He tried to call my bluff, indicating that he would call my editors on the spot.

He called the local news desk and a late-shift assigning editor picked up the phone, who told him she would have a word with the editor and get back to him. She called me and told me the PR guy

had told her she was calling on behalf of the ruler's office and that the story should not be carried on Tuesday but instead on Wednesday. She said she was awaiting word from Hassan Fattah, the editor-in-chief. Five minutes later she called back to announced that no story would be needed and the item would run as a short brief. The PR guy approached me in a triumphant mood and said, "Yasin, I have spoken to your editor-in-chief and told him not to publish the story come what may. He was a good listener because he knows Sheikh Sultan and he obviously was not obstinate as you."

Complaint calls always come in the early mornings, and one came from Osama Samra, the director of Sharjah's department of media. When I saw the number, immediately my heart skipped a beat as I wondered what the hell had happened. I didn't recall filing any story on Sharjah the previous night, but still one never knows why the reason for the summons.

"Yasin, I called to complain about your local news editor called . . ." he started. "We had given you a story the previous night about Sheikh Sultan [the Sharjah ruler] and today I called to follow up why it was not published and you know what he answered to me? He told me that it was not interesting and hung up. Does he even now that Sheikh Sultan is among the seven rulers of this country?"

Osama was one of the few cooperative media executives in Sharjah, as a number of journalists talked about him with a lot of respect. I also liked him, and on several occasions he had helped us at *The National*, feeding good exclusive stories in Sharjah and even when he thought some story was negative or a bad idea from his perspective, he would politely persuade me to abandon it but he never ordered me around like other media directors of other departments had done previously. I felt sorry for him concerning the way my editor had returned his cooperation and my editor could be rude and petty. That I was a wrong person to receive such complaint and there was no way I could help him or even what TLE would do to me if he ever learned that I even gave an audience to someone complaining about him. I wondered most about why he had decided to bypass me and call my boss yet he knew it well I was responsible for Sharjah.

Nonetheless the whole scenario provided an excellent primer on handling disturbing and disruptive PR men. I merely would

suggest that they call TLE. The tactic paid off well when another PR rep in Ajman called that same week. I gave him TLE's number to follow up and from then on, he never called me back or even sent me their PR emails. When I met him a month later and asked what had happened with his phone call to TLE, he told me their department had decided to delete *The National* from their news mailing list after that call.

One time, the PR representative for a medical company that had manufactured the equipment being introduced in Al Qassimi Hospital, wanted me to remove the new machine's cost which I learned when I interviewed one of the hospital's doctors. I had already sent the story to the editor and it was out of my hands, I explained but he asked for the editor's phone number. The deputy local editor (DLE) sent an email after he called, asking to redact the machine's cost but he also went further with changes. DLE was easily much more pliable than TLE, who was on vacation. Now, he wanted me to give prior review of the story to the company's owners. I refused initially but DLE warned me the sheikh owners of their company could do anything to me if the story was wrong. Here all businesses belonged to sheikhs and should be free of any media scrutiny.

All the PRs who worked for companies owned by the ruling families thought they were the sheikhs' de facto censorship arm. I hung up and the PR rep called ten more times when I was away from my phone. I asked the desk to kill the story, because removing the reference to the cost made the story nonsense because it had included quotes from individuals who worried the facilities were riddled with excessive costs. DLE agreed to kill the story.

Not surprisingly, PR people are among the most annoying people for a journalist in UAE to encounter, especially those in government who thought nothing of leading reporters down false trails of information or censorship. After interviewing a source for a forthcoming story, I could expect to hear from a PR representative demanding every detail about the interview and asking to review copy prior to publication. I was surprised by how quickly the news spread because I would schedule interviews directly with my sources. They were not accustomed to speaking with reporters who came from other countries. Their modus

operandi had never been challenged by Arabic-speaking reporters who understood every possible implication of the word "sheikh."

When there was a rumor of a University in Ajman closing, the Al Bayan Arabic newspaper carried the story without naming the university. The English Emirates 24/7 online version did its work of translating Arabic stories and put it online with the wrong university's name. My editor asked me to follow up on the item. First I went to my old school (Preston University), as the article had referenced an American non-accredited institution. I found everything was normal; students were undisturbed. I went to the office of one of my old lecturers who told me that the university slated to be closed was actually in their neighborhood, a school with which they shared a fence. Now I understood what triggered the confusion. He told me the municipality had stopped any student from entering the university and asked the administrators to pull down the banner.

Entering the campus, I noticed ongoing maintenance. The paint was still fresh and outside the area lay the debris of old buildings that were demolished to make way for the new compound. "We are just opening this place," Ahmed Al Yousef, the education consultant, said while we sat in one of the offices at the now-closed institution.

"Did you find it closed when you entered?" he asked, adding, "we have actually submitted all our papers to the ministry of higher education and we are waiting for their approval."

Even though the university signposts that once hung at its entrance had been removed and no student was on campus, no one at the university would admit that it has been closed. As we talked, an assistant came into the office and said the director wanted the journalist in her office.

There were three other staff members seating in the director's office, and one of them asked, "Are you with us or you also want to spoil us?" My reassurances about fairness in my reporting went unacknowledged.

"Listen, nothing should be published—not now and I mean every word of it," the director said in a threatening tone, while her colleagues nodded unanimously. A male staff member accused me of having published the original Al Bayan story—which he called

erroneous—but I reminded him that I was from *The National* and we had not yet published a word on this story.

The director kept repeating an obviously well-rehearsed line: "You don't have to write anything. I want to be clear because I don't want to cause you problems."

I fidgeted in trying to record her words on my new iPhone, because I had not yet figured out all of its functions. I could not establish the university's real name because its signpost had been removed. But my lecturer friend told me it is a Jordanian university with a name resembling "Barkan," but he was not sure about the spelling or pronunciation because he was not fluent in Arabic. As a reporter, I could not use that information to go on record with a confirmation.

The director and her team refused to tell me the name as well, and she even refused to give me her card, instead scribbling her phone number in my notebook.

I debriefed my editor so he could decide whether or not to publish it. I mentioned not being able to get the school's official name confirmed. However, I was able to report that identifying Preston University as the failed institution was wrong. He told me to write up my notes and forward it to another senior editor.

The next day *The National* published a small story in which it named Preston as the school which was closing. It also gave details of the university's failure to get accreditation. Good enough my name was not on the story. The byline went to an education reporter who had worked the story exclusively from the office phones.

My lecturer-friend was the first to call and ask about the mess in the published story. All TLE said was, "We did not rely on your reporting, so you didn't get it wrong."

Of course, PR officials were not only the aggressive gatekeepers. In 2009, The Federal National Council (FNC), UAE's legislature, drafted an update of its press and publications laws which had been in place since 1980. The Human Rights Watch criticized the drafted law for its serious lack of assurances about sustaining a freely operating press. "The law will muzzle the press, preventing honest reporting about the country's continuing financial crisis or about its rulers," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa

director at Human Rights Watch. "Its vague clauses and harsh fines will almost guarantee arbitrariness by government authorities and self-censorship by the media."

The HRW report also noted that the law, if enacted, would impose exorbitant civil penalties that could bankrupt media outlets and silence dissenting voices whom the government believed violate what HRW called overbroad restrictions on content. For example, media organizations found to have "disparaged" senior government officials or the royal family could face fines up to 5 million *dirhams* (US$1,350,000), while those accused of "misleading" the public or "harming" the economy could face fines of up to 500,000 *dirhams* (US$135,000). The law in its draft form would have required media organizations to post an unspecified security deposit against which fines may be charged, a move that would set a significant barrier to entry for smaller, independent press organizations. Many of my colleagues were taken aback by the law's potential consequences. But, at least the press gave the government a chance to make its case. The National Media Council (NMC) published a rebuttal in *The Gulf News* defending the draft laws punishing anyone deemed to insult the royal family or senior heads—and even deputies—of government. It buzzes me about the kind of leaders who cannot stand public or media scrutiny endorse and enact a law intended primarily to protect themselves from the eyes of the media and their people. The rebuttal went on: "Public figures even in most advanced states are provided with ability to seek legal recourse against defamation and sees no reason why public figures in the UAE should not enjoy the same [right.]" But this kind of comparison is lame in all of its nature. Legal recourse can be sought by anyone including a small man like myself. One does not have to be a public figure to seek this recourse even in those states in which the author of this rebuttal thought were advanced in terms of a liberalized press.

However, the drafted legislation never got the UAE president's signature and three years later, it has never been enacted. Unfortunately, the draconian 1980 press and publication law is still active.

The existing law continues to feed the cancer of journalistic censorship in the UAE, which intimidates many professional journalists wary about what would happen should they dare challenge

the government's strict scrutiny. My boss in City 7 TV once called a meeting of his staff to halt coverage of all political and police stories, saying categorically that he never wanted to antagonize the rulers. In *The National*, editors don't accept any story of suicide bids, and sometimes when I thought my story should be published I just changed the details from suicide to an accidental fall from a high-rise but if the suicide occurred by hanging then I had to abandon the story because there was no acceptable way to spin it. Suicide was an important topic and its rate was more prevalent certainly than what government officials would admit. An English-language paper would publish summary counts but not within a context that motivated a much deeper public conversation. Other subjects took on taboo status. My colleagues in *Al Ittihad* occasionally say they are not covering labor strikes and disputes.

But the UAE's strong arm of censorship is aching considerably from over-stretching. When the government censured the mosques the audiences moved toward the mass media but now that the media are being co-opted, the masses have moved on to social media, including Twitter and Facebook.

It has not been an easy migration and the authorities would not find it easy to crack, as the Arab Spring has demonstrated. The simple message which authorities cannot comprehend is that the human mind cannot be suffocated continuously. There are days when mosque imams are targeted by security police. There are also times when professional journalists were told what to write and what was off the table. However, now it is time to tell everyone what to say and what cannot be said, including blogs and tweets. And portable devices have significantly complicated the authorities' capabilities to control their citizens.

I was in Uganda when the five Emirati bloggers were arrested for following into the paths of other freedom lovers in other Arab countries. I read the news initially on a Yahoo site in an Internet café on Luwum Street. I instinctively thought about the work of the UAE's security arm. The police would have to make many more arrests and some of the victims of these arrests would even be innocent. Forget those assurances from my friend Lt. Gen. Dhahi Khalfan Tamim of the anti-cyber crime department working around the clock. One cannot guarantee who sent a post

online. I talked to several Emiratis in Sharjah when one scholar was arrested for tweeting something against the Sharjah ruler and everyone said something similar to the following: "Poor man, he could not have done it. Someone posted it on his account." These were Emiratis who I know loved both their ruler and the Islamic scholar in question. What is interesting is how the UAE authorities were using the social networks as a tool of bullying their opponents. Reading content at the Reporters Without Borders web site, I learned that Lt. Gen. Khalfan used Twitter to warn a human rights activist (Khalifa Al Nuaimi) that Dubai police were on the way to arrest him.

Interesting about most of these activists arrests is that they are first reported in foreign media—in New York or London papers and only then do the local media decide to cover it. I mention this primarily to correct any misperceptions that Dubai's local reporters are just lazy or that we do not know when it happens. Of course, reports about bloggers and social media activists are deemed highly sensitive to cover, as one knows all too well when employed in a UAE media outlet. I always warned a friend who covered the often dramatic court sessions of the trial for the five bloggers in Abu Dhabi to be careful while talking to their families on the phone. He replied, "I know, my friend, all these peoples phones are now bugged, I just ask my straightforward questions and don't even say sorry when the interviewee—especially if she's a woman—breaks down and cries."

Chapter 36

The number of political prisoners is growing. At least 100 have been placed in custody and the number grows steadily. One incident involved the arrest of Mohammed Abdel-Razzaq al-Siddiq for insulting the Sharjah ruler on his Twitter account. I relayed the news around the office during the middle of the day and added I was not chasing the story, as someone bolder could take on the challenge. The item spread rapidly by word of mouth throughout the emirates, and reporters of other rival English papers called me to find out if I was going to pursue the story. All the Arabic newspapers were, of course, not pursuing it, and someone in the office—a reporter doing the Dubai police beat—took it up and by evening she had sent the story back to me. I replied jokingly, "I am not falling into your trap to have me arrested and you write a bigger story for the two of us."

Finally, at around seven p.m. when I had already retired from the day's work an assigning late-shift editor called me to say the story was all over the wires and she wanted me to explain to Sharjah officials that they should say something in response. I made some calls to media offices for the police and the Sharjah government and all were saying to forget about pursuing the item. Al Siddiq, incidentally, was a known Islamic scholar in the UAE.

When I clicked on links to stories on the Internet I found that it was Ahmed Mansour, another blogger who had been arrested the previous year and had given the interview to the wires. He was a new spokesperson for dissenting bloggers, I thought. The ruler had appeared on a Sharjah radio talk show called *Khat Al Mubasher* [Direct Line] that day and spoke in strong language against any kind of dissent but he did not make any reference to the arrest. The UAE news agency WAM carried a story that all Arabic papers and *The Gulf News* picked up. The reports included the following:

"Many people think they are the right ones to talk about Islam and end up expressing their personal opinions and issue their own *fatwas*," he said. "Recently, a person who thinks of himself as the ultimate spokesperson of Islam orchestrated a smear campaign

against the UAE and we had to respond effectively. We are not going to compromise and we are not going to tolerate this.

"Let me tell this person: mind your own business . . ."

I had told the editor and a Dubai reporter when he was on air, we had, of course, heard all that he said but we could not link it to the arrest. The government had to come out itself and say it made the arrest because of this and this but it didn't.

The next day not a single local paper English or Arabic carried the arrest story. The news, however, was popular in the foreign papers. Al Siddiq had been released on bail that Sunday but there was a heavy deployment of military and police at his home on the following Monday. I talked off record to some police on guard who told me they were protecting him because some people who don't tolerate anyone abusing their rulers wanted to kill him.

THE NEW SOCIETY

Chapter 37

One of my first popular stories after joining *The Gulf Today* was about the walls of mosque toilets being filled with phone numbers of prostitution pimps. The story had actually been in general about prostitution. My editor had a conversation with me one evening, who told me there were many African girls, most of them beautiful and young who recently had been trafficked for sex in Dubai. He said the sex business was not news in Dubai but what he wanted me to do was to investigate the emerging trend of young African women currently taking over business formerly dominated by women from the former Soviet states. He identified areas frequented by African prostitutes such as Bank Street, Nasser Square, Naif, Baraha, and Sabaha. He added my investigation would start from there, advising me that he was not in a hurry but he would expect an update of the progress in a week's time. He added one final thing: "Just before I forget, try to get comments from police as well. Your friend Lt. Gen. Dhahi Khalfan should talk about what they are doing to stop the influx of prostitution. I know it's going to be general comments but better to have them in your package." I discussed the story idea with one of my Ugandan roommates who had been in Dubai for quite some time, and he offered to take me around the popular African areas of prostitution and suggested we do it on Fridays when the places are especially busy. On that Friday evening, we passed through the Naif area.

All workers have flocked to Dubai from their labor camps, filling up buildings where women sex workers have flats. There are dozens of queues ending at a specific door, and as one worker moves out, another enters. A friend tried to explain that he and the others are in line for women, and soon I noticed a woman coming out to pick three workers in a line and lead them inside. Most men coming out of the rooms were very shy, acting like spoiled guilty children. Whenever we tried to talk to any of them, they would just cover their faces and disappear as quickly as possible. So I turned most of my questions to the friend who was showing me the place:

How on earth could a woman have all that line of thirsty clients?

The plain answer from my friend was "it's business" but it was another day in a cargo shipping company that I heard a better answer. I again ask how much they pay and the answer is twenty *dirhams* but for an African man the cost is 100.

Why?

He had no answer for this.

Later, we were in a cargo shipping office of a Ugandan businessman and a number of people were coming in to send money to Uganda. Among these customers was a woman—likely another prostitute—who finally answered my question. I overheard a man querying why Africans were charged 200 *dirhams* for a "short service," while Asians only had to pay 50 *dirhams*. The woman replied that for most of those Asian workers they barely "enter inside," so one can handle up to fifteen clients but for the more amply endowed African clients the services would be enough for a day. If one woman had an African client, she would be tired in the shortest time possible. I laughed: racism definitely at work here.

Every nationality had its exhibition areas, but the biggest public space that all nationalities and races frequented were the nightclubs. Some nationalities used *shisha* cafés as their space for exhibition; others were popular in public parks and some lined up in building corridors and roads such as in the Nayef area and Nasser Square. Mostly the elderly women—Arab and Iranians—moved on the roads, closing one eye as a sign to a would-be customer on the road. They were mostly dressed in Abayas like local Emirati women. The Ugandan women called their exhibition areas *kikaanul*, the same name the brokers used. But what caught my attention and my editor's when I offered an update was the scribbling of pimps' numbers in the mosque toilets. The editor instructed me to call the numbers and focus on this as my lead. Most numbers I called were out of service, while others were old disconnected numbers. A few answered, querying in poor English: "You which country?" a first question appended to most greetings in Dubai. Others just started with explanations of the offers indicating "girls of all countries." However, when I asked if that included Africa the respondent's enthusiasm vanished immediately. Russia, Ukraine, India, Bangladesh, Philippine, and Arab all around—one respondent indicated.

How much I asked and responses ranged from 100 to 300 *dirhams* and a few others could say pay my fifty-*dirham* commission and then be free to negotiate the fee with the woman.

At a police press conference announcing a road safety campaign I had a chance to talk to Lt. Gen. Dhahi Khalfan about the prostitution. I waited until he finished the conference speeches and caught him as he was leaving the site with four other police officers. I indicated that I had a simple question I wanted to ask in private but he said no need to be discreet. I explained the investigation and mosque toilet findings, and as I spoke, the details perked up the officers' interests except for the police boss who started laughing. One asked if I had actually called and met some pimps and if I could provide some numbers to the police CID. At last, the commander mouthed some standardized responses and left.

Chapter 38

TLE asked me to do a story on a nightclub for the summer series. The story was to focus on the Ajman Holiday Beach Club and I had to crop out everything to do with prostitutes and concentrate instead on the late-night entertainment enjoyed by the clubbers. As soon as one arrives, the club scene becomes a quick portrait of cultural anthropology, as one readily makes the connections with everybody's status and place at the club. Young women arriving covered in their *abayas* drop them at the gate entrance and walk in revealing short skirts or pants.

There were also crowds of Asian workers at the entrance, ogling every woman who enters and displaying every symptom of acute sex deprivation. Unlike in Dubai where sex can be tendered even at the extremely low price of twenty *dirhams* (US$5.4), here, in Ajman, it is different. The sex-hungry workers cannot afford the entrance fee, much less a drink. Yet, they are adequately happy crowding the gates just watching some people going in and out to catch a breather or some fresh air. When the crowds around the gates grow too large, the bouncer breaks them up and reassures club goers they have nothing to fear.

"Even though I can't enter I still have more fun than those who entered," Kahil, a Bangladeshi worker, tells me. He just earns 800 *dirhams* (US$217) a month and thinks spending 50 *dirhams* (US$13.50) to enter a club would be too extravagant for a man with a family to support back in his country.

"By looking at different people with different night dress attires, and couples getting close I always sum up all their fun, put it into my imagination that I am also enjoying and that is enough satisfaction for me," he explains.

Kahil would only leave after four a.m. because his best moment was to observe the queen dancers, still in their performing outfits, as they board their bus to return to their accommodations. He then would walk about a kilometer to his residence in the Rashidiya area.

Regarding my interview with the club manager, I just needed a few facts about the club, number of clubs around and when it

opened. I also knew they wouldn't tell me how many dancers they have but again I also had to ask. I also needed permission to take photos. The manager was receptive when I met him in his small office—a small wooden shack outside the club. He knew that a journalist had been looking for him. I had been at the club three times earlier in the evening and asked the staff about his whereabouts. It was around nine p.m. when we met because if I delayed an hour he would be too busy supervising the club's activities to answer my question. However, he told me he would not be of help that day, as he needed to consult his Emirati boss. He suspected that his boss would not want an interview to be published without prior review.

A few days later, I called him and he apologized that he could not honor my request, despite my pleas that the story would be cast in a relatively positive light and that my editor did not want any references to prostitutes. I emailed the editor and the photo desk that we already had a story but if we needed images we would have to go undercover. The photo editor was furious: "We cannot send a photographer there if you cannot get permission to shoot. Find another assignment."

Another source, however, turned out to be more helpful for the story. Asrath, the seaman who spends from three to six months on sea each year, had just come out for a week's holiday in Ajman and we met at the beach hotel. "Man, I am here basically to get a woman for today," he confided in me. "Every chance I get to be on land I try to have at least some pleasure before returning back." He also complained that unlike a stopover in Africa, one in the UAE was the worst because there was a real scarcity of women.

"Now see the competition for women in this tiny room," he added. "Out of more than 100 women there are less than ten girls in this room and likely most of the men here want to take a woman home."

Since his escape from work is for a short time he also wanted to be selective, and he wanted one of the best girls in the club, but he could manage to pay only 300 *dirhams* (US$81) at the most for a quick service.

He noticed a short slender Ethiopian girl but the woman was the obsession of all the Emirati men in the club. Many in their

kanduras greeted her as they passed, paid the drink tabs and chatted on and on, making my friend even more nervous. Even though he speaks the same language with the girl, it is the money not a shared language that can win the competition for her attention.

"Man, you just cannot compete with Emirati men on a girl. They can pay any amount, not like us with a limited budget," he said. "What annoys me is most of them have wives at home but come here to give us that unnecessary competition on the few girls."

He had a chance finally to approach the girl and chat her up for a few minutes, but he was resigned, saying he was now just looking for any woman that would accept his 300 *dirhams* (US$81).

"How much did she ask from you?" I queried. "She just wanted to know how much I was offering and then asked me to go away and stop insulting her. She told me she will call the Emirati men to throw me out of the club and even get deported."

He had taken the deportation bit as a joke but he knew he had no opportunity whatsoever. He mentioned last time he had been on land he had lost 180 *dirhams* (US$49) to a *shisha* Ethiopian woman. He had wanted to save on the pleasure expenses and decided instead to go to Fri Murar in Deira where there were many *shisha* cafés that worked like hook-up points for prostitutes. One of the women who served him was good looking, he mentioned his aim for the evening and the girl demanded 200 *dirhams* (US$54). He planned to spend 100 *dirhams* (US$27) and after a long bargain she settled for 150 *dirhams* (US$40). He also paid another thirty for the *shisha* he had taken. After taking the money the girl told him she would go to find the keys, but she didn't return for about two hours.

"All the girls in the café were asking me why you gave it to her. This is a *shisha* shop not a brothel, and after telling me that the same girl will ask me if I have 200 she would go with me," he recalled. When the girl finally appeared she said she didn't know him. He threatened to call the police but no one was threatened by the likelihood of a police visit in that *shisha* shop. There had been numerous Emirati men coming in and out so he knew the girls were well connected with the police. He was desperate, knowing he would soon have to return to the sea without the benefit of even a few minutes' worth of sexual pleasure.

This time he wanted to be more careful. "All these girls have no heart and if I lose my money it will mean I will be abstaining for a year, and I am not a priest man."

Asrath spent another hour slowly moving from girl to girl and when he returned to me this time he sound more resigned than before. All the girls were asking a minimum of 500. "I can't pay that fucking much, and I would rather go to Dubai," he reasoned. He started watching the dancers, as one young woman from the audience had joined the dance floor, dressed in a pair of loose jeans that sagged repeatedly as she danced, exposing her buttocks and g-string. Her show triggered noticeable uneasiness and vigilance among the club goers. One Emirati man, feeling embarrassed approached her, held her hand and asked her to stop dancing, but as she tried to protest the man signaled to the guard to join him to restrain her. Now the men in the club started blasting the Emirati man, as one reveler shouted, "How many mosques did you pass on to come here?" He was thrown out of the club by the guard before he could utter more insults. Asrath whispered to me, "Man, you have to behave here even if you are drunk. Most of those Emirati men are CIDs."

Chapter 39

It was one of the first days I was in Dubai when a young woman in her early twenties came to the shipping company offices where we spent most of the evenings before retiring to our rooms for the night. At first the shipping manager thought she was one of the people who wanted to send money to Uganda so he asked her to come and sit in the area where he was serving clients. She declined, explaining in the local language that she was not a client but came to the office because she needed some assistance. Everyone in the small one-room office, which was packed with ten men, was looking straight at the soft-spoken female visitor.

"What kind of assistance do you need, Madame, and who guided you that in this office you could get that assistance?" Fahad, the shipping manager, asked. The nervous woman first stammered with a few undistinguishable words, as it appeared that she needed more privacy to voice her request but no one was going to leave his seat to help locate someone who could help her. All any of us could do was to stay silent and those who looked straight in her face lowered their eyes. After a few stumbles she gained ground and told a similar version of a story that was familiar to anyone who had spent time in Dubai. "I am Iryn and I need a job, sir. I came to this country to look for a job; my mother is very poor and raised the money for me to come here from financial lending companies, so we have to pay back and I have to get a job to help her pay back what she borrowed," she explained. Her story resembled mine as I also was looking for a job at that time, so now I became more attentive to see how she would be helped. "Where are you staying right now?" Fahad asked.

"I am staying at Hajjati Diana's place, and the people who made my visa and air ticket had promised me a receptionist's job in a Dubai company. When I got to the airport I was picked up by some boy and he took me to Hajjati's place. From there I have been told that the kind of work available that you all know. I am sorry I cannot do it," she said, breaking down in tears.

Hajjati Diana was a popular pimp we all knew. Though a non-Muslim she had earned the Hajjati name for being elderly and Ugandans were too shy to call elderly people by their names. She

was older than 65. Iryn had only one chance because she was not in debt with Hajjati. She had already paid for her flights, visa, and job fees when she came. So Hajjati was only obliged to advise her about what to do but not to recover any money from her.

Iryn's story had saddened everyone in the office but the interview had not yet ended.

"So what kind of job are you looking for?"

"I'm a graduate with a bachelor of arts in human resources from Makerere University and would appreciate any decent job."

"Okay," Fahad concluded. "Go back and come back tomorrow morning to write your CV on this computer where I am sitting." At that, Fahad signaled that we continue with our previous discussions about the best Ugandan musicians and no one argued.

I learned after a few days that Fahad had offered the girl a job as his secretary, but I also heard that he had allowed her to start sleeping in the office and another that he moved his sleeping quarters from his room to the office.

After four months I also moved to the same company to send some money, and Iryn was at the desk where she received my money and gave me a receipt. As I exited from the lift, I heard someone calling my name from the staircase. It was Iryn.

She asked me to come behind the building because she wanted to tell me something. She had a list of more woes, as Fahad was now seeing another girl and wanted her out of the office in order to make room for her replacement. She was thinking of starting afresh to look for jobs and because I was one of the success stories in the job search challenge she needed my advice. She also needed some money, because for the last two months she had not received her salary and Fahad had nearly stopped giving her food.

"He is ever complaining during day and night," she explained, adding that sometimes she does not return to sleep in the office." I know he would be sleeping with that girl but I just keep quiet."

"You mean you had started sleeping together in the office?" I asked innocently enough. She shrugged me off insisting instead I advise her about what she should do. As we discussed her priorities, she expressed another fear. She thought Fahad had infected her with HIV and thus she could not risk going for blood tests, which were required to obtain an employment visa.

"How on earth could you have sex without condoms with him?" I demanded.

She replied she was at Fahad's mercy, and he never used condoms for the four months they had been together. From then I only heard about Iryn in gossip, with the most common item being that she had been sent out of office and had joined the group of other female sex workers. Even when I visited Fahad's office to send money home there was yet another girl at the desk.

Those close to Fahad could tell me that he had just one problem with Iryn. She was not a Muslim and uncompromising with her religion. She had found a group of other Christians and she was going for Saturday prayers and always swore with Jesus even in front of Fahad, who was a graduate of one of Uganda's best Quran schools and by Ugandan standards was a sheikh (Muslim scholar).

I bumped into Iryn three years later at Bin Thani Cargo, where I had gone to ship my cement and she was there, sending abroad numerous cosmetic items. She was in the company of another girl who looked like she could have been her teenaged sister and was always deferring to her with the respect one would expect to be paid toward an elder. Iryn asked me for a lift if I was going back to Deira and although I was actually going to Sharjah I thought it would be pitiful to leave them stranded. It was here that she told me how she was done with prostitution and was going back to Uganda with the few savings she had managed to scrape together.

"Everyone including my God knew this was not my favorite work by any measure. I just prayed that Jesus forgave me, enabling me to carry on without this onerous burden. I hated this work, I hated everyone doing it, I hated myself now and hated anyone who paid me for this work," she said, taking on a preacher's tone with each sentence as it was uttered.

"I am telling this girl, you see she is new and I am helping her with a number of customers and how to survive at work, as she will take most of my customers when I leave, but I tell her she should not plan to stay so long in this work," she continued. "She should do it now or for about a year get a small capital and quit while repenting, Jesus is always forgiving but when you don't die

before repenting." She paused, realizing that she had invoked the name of Jesus several times and inquired if I was offended by her remarks. I said it was fine, as I knew she was not a Muslim.

She told me she was shipping her capital to start a cosmetic shop in Kampala. She already had managed to build a house and shipped to Uganda a sedan car. If her business did well she would not regret leaving Dubai's stress for customers and carrying the guilt of doing something wrong. After about a year I found some old friends and we were recollecting our memories of those days we had just come to Dubai, as one reminded us about Iryn, and how she came to Fahad's office so politely and demure and we all laughed at the memory. I asked where she was and another told us how she had returned to Dubai about two months earlier. Unlike the rest of us, he seemed to know her better, and he told her story in detail. She had returned to Uganda with a high-class sense of esteem, but she had also picked up bad habits of drinking and clubbing that she couldn't give up while trying to establish herself in Kampala. Her business finally collapsed and went on her knees to beg some small girl she had trained in sex work to buy her a ticket and return. As he recounted the story, it was now more than evident that Iryn was back to business and offered to give her number to any of us who wanted it and we all unanimously declined the offer. Though I can't rule out that someone else had asked for it later in secrecy. Temptation for many knew no bounds.

Chapter 40

It was almost midnight when we left the Dubai International Quran Award competitions at the Dubai Chamber of Commerce in the company of several Ugandan friends. I spotted one lady who had gone to school with me at Kawempe though she was a few years ahead of me. We had served together in the school's Muslim association and we got to know each other quite well. She was wearing a black open *abaya* with a skirt and blouse inside and white veil. I moved toward her and I immediately saw her face pale in shock as I called out her true name (Maryam) to shake her hand. One of the men in her company corrected me that she was actually Aisha, not Maryam. I admitted my error, knowing inside that she now was living under a pseudonym but insisting still that I knew her, a fact that she acknowledged. We exchanged a few greetings and she asked the man in her company to take her home, as she was tired.

I also left with three people I had given a lift to in my car, and one asked if I really knew the girl they all called Hajjati because of her professed piety despite being a prostitute. The discussion turned toward her and everyone in the car seemed to know her well except me. They told me how she never missed a prayer and her well-known abstinence from alcohol when she went out to clubs "searching," as they called it. Why she was a prostitute yet staunch in her Islamic faith was a mystery no one in the car could explain or defend. I decided not to disclose her true identity that day, and as far as I knew from my Uganda contacts she was in London and I recently had spotted her in Dubai. I understood fully why she lived with false names.

I was to meet her two more times in the same competitions just waving at each other before we could start talking. On the final day of the competitions I met her on the steps and when she looked around and saw no Ugandan watching us she asked me to accompany her outside so that we could talk. First thing she asked me was never to disclose her identities, or her father—a popular Hajji—would not just disown her but kill her if he ever learned she was in Dubai.

"Are you deceiving even your family about where you are?" I asked cautiously. She answered that only her mother and one elder sister knew her whereabouts, while the others believed she was in London working on a decent job. Even when she sent money through a Ugandan-owned shipping company she told the staff to indicate on the transfer that the money came from London.

Her second request was more pointed.

"Yasin, please delete me from your camera. I saw you taking some of our pictures today and I don't trust journalists." I opened my camera and started searching for her image but I could only find one, which I deleted.

Her third request was yet more pointed.

"Don't ever talk about me with any old school friends. I know when you came here, you were the first OB to come and get a job as a journalist and since then about two others have joined and all of you are from our school. I have been avoiding all of you people for a purpose: You people from Kawempe talk about everything and you being a journalist must be worse."

So the conversation moved from requests to questions and I was now in the lead.

"Why are you here, Maryam, and what you do?"

First correction.

"I am Aisha, not Maryam, and I don't want to hear that name from you again. Now you want to know what I do. I am a soldier like all Ugandan women here," she said.

Soldier was a name used in the Ugandan community to refer to prostitutes.

"The first day we met, everyone in my car was praising you as a religious woman. How do you reconcile what you do with Islam?"

She was unmoved. "So you people were discussing me when you left us. Tell me what else did they tell you and what did you tell them—my true names?"

"Not actually," I replied.

"Okay, Yasin, let me be frank with you as a young brother. Am doing this work out of desperation. My father and mother raised some money for me to go to London and work. The man who organized our trip told them we shall be going through a transit in Dubai, staying here only two days and then proceed on. When I got to Dubai

his pimp contacts told me the road was closed, they owed me about $1,500 and asked me to pay them back and win my liberty."

She continued without a pause.

"They confiscated my passport and introduced me to prostitution. I have since paid them and I'm now struggling to earn some money for capital and leave this curse. I pray for myself in every prayer. I know Allah would be merciful to forgive me and provide me with a way out."

"Why didn't you look for a job like I have done and others? I mean, a professional job. You have a degree," I said. "My Dubai visa was only two weeks, and by the time I thought of finding a job I was already on overstay. The bureaucracies of a job risked me getting deported and never to come back . . ."

Someone interrupted calling her as she talked. People were leaving the competition as others were celebrating their winners. It was time to go home.

Chapter 41

The City of Hope was founded by Sharla Musabih, an Emirati female, that provides shelter for battered women in Dubai. The shelter, housed in Jumeira with a street address indicating 18, came to be popularly known as "Villa Eighteen."

I had visited Sharla Musabih's "city of hope" and talked to a number of her hosts, all of whom said she had helped them a lot, but still what could one expect from someone speaking in her presence.

She told me she was worried about the increasing cases of domestic violence in the country, adding that most of her hosts were abused married women and the country did not have a support system to address these issues.

"The only way to protect women is to have a system—a proper system with a special code for women. Have specialists with women affairs. Multinational coding should be in every place like police and judiciary," she told me. "Whenever a woman reported to the police about her husband beating her. A police officer would look at her and say 'shame upon you for exposing your husband.' If anything is done, it would be only to call the husband and sign some papers that he would not do it again and then let him go. The wife would be seriously beaten by the husband that very day and this time she would have nowhere to turn."

I called Aisha Ahmed Al Marri, the head of social research at the Dubai Police Human Rights department at that time, to respond to the allegations. She mostly contradicted Sharla's allegations, as she defended the police.

"Most domestic violence cases arrive at police stations at the advanced stage," she replied. "Hence, comes the role of social service sections where they set several choices before the parties of the problem. In the case of violence against the wife, a medical report from the forensic medical must be attached with the wife's call to prove the case. Thus, the victim has the choice to submit her case to the social worker in order to solve the problem without resorting to prosecution. In this case, the social worker opens a file to examine the reasons behind the domestic violence. Then, the husband must undertake a pledge not to harm the wife again

and consequently the wife optionally drops the case." She continued. "If the victim refuses to peacefully solve the case, the social service and the human rights department provide all legal options to the victim. Then, the call is transferred to a case and submitted to the prosecution and the court as an illegal case. Some cases are solved through the family reconciliation section in Dubai courts."

VM Rakesh, my editor at *The Gulf Today*, had known Sharla for quite some time. When I returned from "Villa Eighteen" with a story, he told me she was very instrumental in helping to ban the use of children as camel jockeys, but he thought her new battles concerning battered wives or trafficked girls was more than she could handle as a social cause. "She thinks she can change the world, but I will tell you, Yasin, things to do with women are very sensitive in this country, and sooner or later she will be thrown out," he predicted.

Unfortunately, I was not with Rakesh when Sharla's "city of hope" started crumbling.

Most of the time Aisha contradicted Sharla, being the first to tell me that she was actually abusing the women that came for her shelter.

Mohammed Al Mur, the director of the human rights department, then appeared on a local radio station to say the department did not have any relationship with Sharla Musabih's "Villa Eighteen" and that women with domestic violence problems should seek help from the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children.

I called Afrah Al Basti, the CEO of the foundation at the time, who told me that eight women had fled Sharla's shelter that week alone to seek sanctuary at her location. She said the women cited mistreatment and personal wrangles with Sharla herself, as she offered to let me interview them. I couldn't make it to her shelter then because I was also doing some freelance work at *Khaleej Times*, and I had very limited available funds for traveling constantly around various areas of the emirates. To give the story its balance, I tried to contact Sharla, but her phone was disconnected.

I finally reached her through email and she called back indicating she was in Ethiopia and could not return to the country because she was wrangling with the government. She had a lot of

personal problems with Afrah, who had taken over her former hosts. She also told me of how her shelter had been deliberately denied a license for the last four years of its operation but she said that not all those in the government were against her, and that she had some good support from officials such as Ali Kaabi and Maryam Al Roumi, the ministers of labor and minister of social affairs at that time, respectively. However, their support could do little to help make her shelter a legal operation.

But anyone who has knowledge of the UAE—especially Dubai—would be troubled as I was in understanding how a shelter in the heart of Dubai operates without a license for four full years with full knowledge of authorities, and its founder appearing on talk shows with police officials.

Chapter 42

Interracial and interfaith marriages in the UAE remain severely restricted. The restrictions are mostly on Emirati women who, by de facto, are not allowed to marry non-Emirati men or foreigners even if the foreigners are Arabs. Program after program is heard on the radio, with the intent to discourage intermarriage of Emirati women to foreigners. On several occasions my favorite radio station in Ajman brought up the topic on Thursday nights allowing callers to discuss why Arab women should not marry non-Arabs. The problem, according to most callers, was that men allowed to marry foreigners a lot of Emirati men have taken their chances and had left innocent Emirati women as spinsters.

The government's marriage fund has tried to solve the problem. When officials conducted their studies they found that high marriage costs of Emirati women were reasons for Emirati men leaving their country's brides for foreigners. The fund officials conducted several visits to tribes in different parts of the country to generate awareness that would help reduce marriage costs. They have also set a minimum cost of a wedding to be 50,000 *dirhams* (US$13,580) and the maximum to be 120,000. The problem is with Emiratis being paid about 5,000 (US$1,358) a month it would take a citizen almost a year to save for a simple wedding.

Still the cost would be unaffordable to many in low-salaried jobs or those who were unemployed. So the fund managers came up with another solution: offer marriage grants to new couples. The grant carries conditions, such as the applicant should marry an Emirati woman.

Even with the marriage fund grants the youths still found several financial obstacles to marriage. The costs of living and housing were still prohibitively expensive for many. Public housing grants were still only open to families but only married couples. One time a Sharjah Consultative Council member asked the director of Sharjah Housing Department (Khalifa Al Tunaiji) why the government did not give grants to people planning a wedding so that they are motivated to marry. He replied that as the government still struggles to give all families a home, it was neither appropriate nor relevant to bring this debate down to the status of singles.

One Emirati male friend told me that if one had to marry an Emirati girl he had to marry one from his own family. "Only a girl from your own family would be patient when you have financial problems and her family would not despise you," he said. That explained why most marriages among Emiratis are arranged with their next of kin but this was also carrying health risks. About 10 to 15 percent of Emirati children are born with some form of disability and about 57 percent of the cases reported at Dubai's Al Wasl hospital were of children belonging to Emirati couples who were close blood relatives.

A day before the UAE celebrated its fortieth anniversary as a nation, the president issued a decree that conferred citizenship to children of Emirati women married to non-Emirati men once they reached the age of eighteen. One Emirati woman married to a Yemeni friend called me after reading our paper that proclaimed the decree as a boost to women's rights. I was not the reporter on the lead story, but I was the only one she knew at the paper whom she could contact.

She said, first of all, the decree was misplaced because the restrictions did not allow Emirati girls to marry non-Emirati men, and then how could they have children and raise them up to eighteen years. She had married a non-Emirati man at the age of thirty when no Emirati man would come for her hand, but since then she had been deprived of allowances and her marriage had gone unrecognized by the country. She wanted me to publish her query without naming her.

I told her that I would call my editor and tip the story, and check if we could get other Emirati women who were still disgruntled to share similar stories. However, inside my heart I knew no editor in the UAE would allow such a story. My editor simply replied with one word: "Neglect." When she called after two days to find out if I was going ahead with the story, I told her that my editor did not like it, and if he had some sort of praise to the country's rulers and decree we would just be obliged to carry that. She hung up on me before I could finish.

The plight of Emirati women getting married to foreigners is among the most controversial topics in UAE society. The government goes on the defensive, claiming it has not banned Emirati

women getting married to foreigners but instead has just restricted the practice. In other words, one could go ahead at her own peril. The restrictions include not passing on the rights of citizenship to children of Emirati women born to foreign men. To most Emirati women these restrictions are more like a ban and to a country where challenges to government restrictions are taken seriously, one would have troubles registering the marriage to concerned government departments such as courts. The government would deny this practice but a number of Emirati men and women confirmed that, indeed, the practice was extensive.

The topic had been brought up several times by Emirati women legislators in councils, and listening to the motions one would wonder whether these are merely restrictions or an outright ban. Women members of the Sharjah Consultative Council (SCC) had tabled a motion asking for recognition of marriages between Emirati women and non-Emirati men. They had also tabled another motion asking for a ban on giving residency visas to young foreign brides. In this motion the emphasis was that their men were forgoing Emirati women for young brides from India, Morocco and other countries.

During the country's second election campaigns in 2011, I interviewed a number of female candidates and all of them wanted to see the law removed that prohibited Emirati women from marrying non-Emiratis. One female candidate (Manahel Abdul Rahman) from Ajman had summarized it so well for me in an article I was to write about women candidates then. She said: "If women cannot marry foreign men it is only fair for men also not to marry them." In the Ramadan message of that same year, the Dubai Grand Mufti Dr. Ahmed Al Haddad called for restrictions of Emirati women on getting married to foreign men. I was about to disagree with a mufti who spoke in the name of Islam to pass on their national prejudices but then I remembered one incident during my youth when Mamma had become cross at me for debating the decisions of Muslim scholars. She had heard me in the company of other relatives debating some *fatwas* issued by some popular scholars when she broke into our conversation.

"Stop the discussion, Yasin, you have to respect the scholars because you are not one," she reproached. "If you thought you

know some verse or *Hadith* that the scholar has contradicted, just know the scholar also knows your verse and a thousand more. He also knows other verses and *Hadiths* that support his opinion that you don't know and has weighed all of them before coming to issue a *fatwa*."

It is not the UAE alone where local women marrying foreigners is largely stigmatized but the whole Gulf region. The Al Sabah royal family of Kuwait claims not a single one of their females has married a foreigner for two centuries even though men were always doing it. Justin Thomas, a professor of psychology in the department of health science at Zayed University, has described this as "status assertion," crudely formulated as "we can marry your women, but you can't marry ours."

Amna Al Nuaimi, an Emirati colleague who worked with the *Al Ittihad* newspaper, once told me that the discriminations regarding marriages were not only affecting expatriates.

"Emiratis with Yemen ancestry cannot marry Emiratis with Iran ancestry or any others," she said. "Today, these prejudices are closing as most old people with such prejudices have died but it will take centuries when white female Emiratis can marry black Emiratis of slave ancestry."

There were plenty of anecdotes about this topic. Hiba Ahmed was a media representative for one of the big government departments in Sharjah, and we had become friends through the nature of our work. One day, she told me how she had seen some of my wife's pictures on Facebook and read that we had just formalized our wedding from my status post. She asked if I had married a Ugandan girl or another African, and I replied a Ugandan.

"Is it not allowed in your country also to marry a foreigner?" she asked. I replied that no one cares whom I married.

She told me of her story when she had a boyfriend (Hassan) while still at university in Dubai. Hassan was from Palestine and he had asked her family to marry her but the family refused. Her family did not approve of their daughter getting married to a foreigner even though he was an Arab. She told me she had one cousin who had married an Iraqi man and everyone in the family hated her. She also never wanted to be treated like her so she gave up on her love. Meanwhile the man had landed a good job after university,

returned to Palestine and married. He was living happily with his Palestinian bride in Dubai. At twenty-eight, Hiba was still unmarried and was losing hope that she would ever get married, except as a second wife and maybe then to Hassan. She was convinced her education and, now, age had played a role in her not getting married. The truth was that most Emirati men married very young girls and were not willing to court educated women.

One of the most disturbing categories of events in the UAE surrounds rape cases. Opening any UAE newspaper on a given day is almost sure to reveal an article about sexual assaults, rapes, defilements, and similar crimes. The court caseload is heavily burdened with investigations of such assaults.

There are no official figures regarding the number of rape cases reported in the country but the evidence in newspapers from court cases is overwhelming. And, not only do rape cases involve women but children as well. For example, in July 2007, a 15-year-old French boy was raped by three Emirati nationals (including one teenager) after being lured into their luxurious SUV and taken to the desert where the attack occurred. Most disturbing was the discovery that one of the attackers tested positive for HIV. The motivation for such a heinous crime is undeniably incomprehensible but what is even a more disturbing mystery is what the other Emiratis thought after learning that an attacker was HIV positive. The two adult rapists were sentenced to fifteen years in prison while the third attacker (a teenager) was tried in juvenile court.

Two years later, another violent rape case occurred in which a four-year-old Pakistan boy was raped and murdered in a Qusais mosque bathroom, perhaps the lowest possible imaginable crime to be committed especially in a place of holy sanctuary. Regarding the reporting of a rape case, the description of suspects always follows the following conventions: Emiratis become Arabs, Indians are Indians, Saudis are GCC nationals, Nigerians are Nigerians, Sudanese are Africans, Egyptians are Arabs and Syrians are Arabs, Filipinos are Filipinos, Bahrainis are GCC nationals, and Pakistanis are Asians.

Chapter 43

Some of the most deeply affected aspects of working as a journalist center on the task of covering AIDS and HIV. In 2008, I attended an event marking the commemoration of World AIDS Day at which then Dubai's minister of health Humaid Mohammed Obaid al Qattami announced that ministry lawyers were drafting laws to ensure people with HIV/AIDS had access to education, employment, and basic rights.

These laws were, of course, being framed to benefit only the Emiratis as all other nationalities were being deported as soon as they tested positive for HIV. At the event the minister said the country registered thirty-five more patients during the previous year, bringing the number of Emiratis being treated and would-be beneficiaries of this proposed legislation to 540. He added the ministry officials were keeping all HIV patients under surveillance so that they do not spread the disease further. For long I have tried to find Emirati citizen HIV-positive patients among those receiving government treatment so that I could learn how the government surveillance worked but it was in vain. One physician once indicated to me that a number of HIV patients received treatment at a Baraha hospital and I asked a Nigerian nurse to find me one and all she told me was all the people she saw with evident signs of the disease had turned down physician requests to do the HIV tests.

"They just don't want to know because once they know, the stigma in the community would kill them before the disease itself," she told me. I did learn, too, that the government would provide anti-retroviral drug therapy but some patients stubbornly refused because they feared being ostracized far more than the impact of the disease itself. Sadly, they were dying untreated much like my own poor uncles and aunts in Uganda.

During my first years in the UAE, I endeavored to learn as much as possible about how the Arabs dealt with HIV/AIDS. My interest focused on the low prevalence rate of the pandemic that threatened to destroy generation after generation in my country. I thought I could learn as much as possible not in order to assume

the role of policymaker in my native Uganda but to offer the information as advice and counsel to friends and family back home. The conservative and religious culture that forbids sex outside wedlock helped to control the spread of the virus. But as one observes in Dubai even after a short time, adherence to these old cultural mores and norms is diminishing rapidly.

One also learns how commercial sex is thriving at a rate much higher than even in less conservative countries and bringing with it consequences of diseases such as AIDS and other debilitating sexually transmitted illnesses and infections. Sex workers are never tested, as most of them are on visit visas or no visa at all. They have clients from Arab men who then risk inadvertently infecting their poor wives. And, because testing HIV positive indicates a strong verdict that they likely committed adultery, many will never take that chance to be tested.

In 2006, I applied for a media sponsorship to cover the international AIDS conference in Toronto. I was the only journalist from the UAE selected to cover the conference.

During the conference, I was just sitting in the lobby of the hotel where we were having a media training workshop when one of the journalists from a former Soviet bloc nation approached me, asking what was the situation regarding HIV/AIDS among Arabs—especially those in UAE and Saudi Arabia. The discussion ricocheted from region to region but soon the dialogue shifted from HIV/AIDS to ideological debates about capitalism and communism. The European journalist blamed the United States for allowing AIDS patients from all over the poor world to die without reasonable opportunities for treatment and therapy. He called the Western denial on patented anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs) as the real killer now, not the disease itself. He buttressed his argument, claiming that if ARVs were not patented, the costs of these medications would fall sufficiently to be affordable for everyone, perhaps just as commonly as Panadol or aspirin. He asked me if even people in Africa would die just because of not having access to Panadol. At that time it cost $10,000 in Africa to undergo a treatment program of the well-substantiated triple combination therapies (3CT) that attack the lifecycle of the AIDS virus at three separate stages. The

3CT therapy included a number of drugs required to be taken on a daily basis including antibiotics, antiviral, and anticancer drugs.

It was immediately clear that few could afford the drug therapy, particularly with an average yearly wage in the continent being as low as $1,000. However, the Russian friend's estimate of ARVs eventually costing the same as Panadol or aspirin fell way short of what even the most expert critics of patents had projected. Many of whom I interviewed at the conference said that in the absence of patents, drugs could cost $200—at 20 percent, still a hugely untenable proportion relative to their income.

Nonetheless the discussion had been informative, as I immediately remembered a number of relatives who already had succumbed to AIDS. I also remembered I had some other relatives in sick bay at the time when this man was telling me how cheap it would be to get AIDS treatment without patents. I thought I should read more about the American patents and then talk to more people and write a story.

To my surprise most of the youths even in the conference had quite a bit of knowledge about how the prohibitive costs of drug patents were betraying the lives of thousands—if not millions—of people. One youth told me that even accounting for the corporate donations, the impacts amounted to nothing more than a futile mockery. The pharmaceuticals had far more than the sufficient means to solve the AIDS pandemic but they were just interested in profits, a sentiment I heard repeatedly from young activists. At that particular conference, Bill and Melinda Gates had announced their foundation's donation of $500 million to the global fund for expanding the availability of treatments and preventive protocols against AIDS. Likewise, President George W. Bush had announced the U.S. government's commitment to provide $15 billion over the following five years and the Canadian government's commitment of $800 million for the fight against AIDS.

As heartening as the announcements were, youthful activists remained skeptical. A young participant asked me why the governments did not press the pharmaceutical companies to abandon their patent protections and make the drugs and therapies as freely available as possible. I wrote an article for a

youth magazine indicating just how passionate the support for universal access to HIV/AIDS therapeutic drugs was among the sentiments expressed by young activists at the international AIDS conference.

Months later after returning to Dubai, I read that Americans were now attempting to unblock patents on Tamiflu, a bird flu drug developed by the Swiss pharmaceuticals giant Roche. First thing that came to my mind was that Uncle Sam was being selfish to companies of other countries but there also was another explanation appearing in the media. The avian flu that had started in Asian countries had found its way into Western countries and the panic rose that their populations would be affected this time. The same level of expressed panic, however, was not prevalent in poor African countries where HIV was killing millions, once again reminding how the vigorous protection of patents was compromising the vital access needed to help curb the pandemic. The real explanation, however, turned out to be plain, simple, and disturbing: The Western countries had valued the lives of their people more importantly than the lives of untold tens upon tens of thousands in Africa and Asia who were dying from this terrible disease.

Chapter 44

Just in front of my grandfather's home is the family's graveyard. Four children of Sheikh Hood and Musebeeyi—three daughters and a son—are interred here. Jalia Nansubuga a.k.a. Mamma Jalia was born and died in 1992; followed by Jamida Namutebi a.k.a. Mamma Jamida, who died in 1996; Safina Nankya a.k.a. Mamma Safina, who died in 1997, and Abdul Sseviri, who died in 2001. The four graves are a reminder of the havoc HIV/AIDS has wreaked on our family in the period of just one decade. And they are not the only victims of the deadly virus who are buried in the small family graveyard. There are other relatives such as Nabikadde Fatumah who died in 2003, as well as Nankya and Nakityo.

The 1990s were notorious for AIDS deaths in Uganda. Not a single family in the country could claim not to have lost someone to the disease. A common slogan was that AIDS would not just claim a single person in a family; it would go for a second and a third or even more. The four relatives of my mother certainly were confirming testimony to this. Mamma Jalia died at a time when the disease could not even be pronounced at funerals even though a popular musician (Philly Bongole Lutaaya) announced that he was HIV positive and strove to give AIDS a public face of awareness in order to fight stigmatization. Philly had also died a few years before Mamma Jalia. Those were times when the country had aggressive campaigns like the ABC campaign ("Abstain, Be Faithful or use Condoms").

In schools the film "Ndiwulira," which focused on AIDS, was shown almost every Friday afternoon. The word "sex" and "AIDS" were closely related and few bothered to separate the connection.

Mamma Jalia was the friendliest and loveliest among my aunties. She had been at her deathbed for four years with recurrent fevers and vomiting and her sisters and brothers had moved her from hospital to hospital to find a cure but all in vain. She often uttered a phrase that my mother recalled her using: "I don't know the kind of disease killing me but it kills in pain I wish it never affects any other person after me."

At my young age I had also offered my Quran recitations to her ailment, and sometimes she felt better after I read several *surahs* for her. She would often ask my mother to summon me to the

village during holidays to read the Quran to her. Among the *surahs* she most enjoyed was the *Surrat al Ghasiyya*, because her name was mentioned there.

Her health continued to deteriorate in the last months of 1991, and during my December holidays, an owl appeared nightly at our mango tree hooting mournfully, a sign my auntie took as the announcement of her impending death. In Buganda, owls were heeded as the messengers of death. Every night when it appeared, she asked one of us to go and send it away. I obeyed, lobbing stones to frighten the ominous dark visitor but unfortunately I could not make its message disappear. I whispered to her when another relative, Sheikh Hood's elder brother, died in 1991 that the owl had announced his death not hers, and she smiled. But when she started crying as her uncle's body was being taken out for burial she cried with words "*am next*." She died in 1992 when I was at school.

My youngest brother (Wahab) had fallen sick and was hospitalized at the supreme council hospital where Mamma worked, and whenever I returned from school I visited him and it was here where Mamma broke the news that Mamma Jalia had died. She was the first close person to me who had died and I went to the village for her burial. Mamma could not attend, as she wanted to remain at my brother's bedside. It was strange not to see my grandfather leading prayers at her burial. Some of the other mourners told me about her last moments. She never lost her senses even at the last minute, as she asked for water and told her mother she thought she was dying for sure that day. She didn't have a chance to take the water she asked for, her teeth clutched and eyes looked above, and in her mother's hands she finally succumbed. On the night of the funeral I was sleeping within earshot of a group of male mourners—they could have been Mamma Jalia's age—who were gossiping. One said AIDS was only taking beautiful women and wondered how the world would be without them. My auntie Jalia was respected for her beauty. It is an ironic tragedy that such a terrible disease overshadowed it.

And if Mamma Jalia's wish that the disease would not strike another was a prayer, God the Almighty found for her a substitute and the disease continued to wreak havoc unabated.

In 1993, Mamma Safina was staying with us in my mother's newly built house in Kyengera, as she had left the village because of her illness which now had given her a hacking constant cough. The coldness of an unfinished house with no windows or even cement on the flow had aggravated her condition. One night my mother had awakened to cover her with a mat, in order to help her sustain whatever body heat she could use to battle against the cough. I was sharing a bed with my cousin Moses Lutalo now an orphan of Mamma Jalia and we shared the sleeping room with Mamma Safina. I could see the mat moving. She was trembling and I still remember the panic in my mother's voice as she asked Farida, my elder sister, to bring a charcoal stove into the room for cooking. She also ordered her to prepare tea.

The following day Mamma Safina was taken and admitted to Mulago Hospital where she stayed for more than two months. Mamma told me that Safina had been diagnosed with tuberculosis.

I remember going to the hospital's Ward 4C. I did see patients who had become so emaciated that they looked skeletal. Another woman's legs had swollen so extraordinarily out of proportion to her otherwise slim frame. Her legs were covered with a sheet but still one could see the rolls of flesh from underneath the sheet. One of Safina's neighbors had died a few minutes after we had entered the ward, and I remember how inconsolable the family was in its grief. Mamma Safina told us that she didn't even know why she was in that ward. "The fate of everyone in this ward is death; someone dies on your right then another one on left then above you and below you, I have seen it all and I don't think I belong here anymore," she said. "I don't think I am about to die here." After the two months she returned home and was much healthier.

The following year (1994) Mamma Jamida turned up at Mamma's home in Makindye, with a long skin scar on her face. That year she had given birth to twins and one had died soon after. She was carrying the surviving twin daughter Nakato in her hands when she appeared, dressed in a long Muslim black abaya and a veil, the scar was barely visible but once Mamma Jamida removed the veil the two other sisters Mamma Safina and my mother were shocked at the sight.

They asked question after question about her health and how it had all started. She told them about a fever she had and like most fevers it had left some scars on one side of her mouth. However, this time the scars had been long and it almost covered the whole of her left cheek. It was only when Mamma Jamida had gone for a shower that Mamma Safina asked my mother if she had any doubt that the scar on their sister was a Kisipi, a herpes zoster or shingles that was commonly associated with people who had AIDS.

Soon the two sisters were on their respective deathbeds and Mamma Jamida, the closest friend of my mother died first in 1996.

By March 1997 both sisters were gone. It was a deeply depressing time for me, as I was unable to secure the funds to travel for the funeral. The Ugandan AIDS commission said, at the time, that 30 percent of the nation's adults were dealing with HIV or AIDS at any given time. Indeed, in my family—as with so many other Ugandan families—our heartaches at the loss of so many loved ones had undoubtedly overwhelmed the clinical sterility of this shocking statistic.

Chapter 45

As the body of my uncle (Abdul Sseviri) lay in repose in the living room, covered with a bed sheet and a thin curtain separating the body from the mourners, I heard an expression from my grandmother Musebeeyi mourning cries that haunted me deeply. Translating it to English, I could say that she regretted what might have been the circumstances of emotion had her husband (my grandfather Sheikh Hood) been alive to see what the seemingly unbreakable tragedy of shortened life which had befallen his family. "Just when I thought I am retiring, I am subjected to a torture of daily burials of my own children. The children we brought up with Ssekka (Sheikh Hood) together as parents. Now I have to care for their orphans alone," I recalled her saying. Throughout the funeral, the words of my grandmother shook and disturbed me greatly. I looked around the mourners to count at least five orphans that the aging Musebeeyi was now responsible for feeding and sending to school. I was just fresh at the university and when I returned her words were indelibly etched into my brain. I could not blame her other children for not picking up the orphans to stay with them, as everyone had his or her own bag of troubles in gathering the funds necessary to raise and school the children.

At times, my mother had one or two of the orphans stay with her but still the burden remained just as overwhelming to my grandmother. I went to a local charitable organization, asking Sheikh Swaleh Mutebi to help me raise and educate one orphan from our family. He agreed, giving me a scholarship to admit one child for study in the Islamic school in Bugembe. I chose to take Mamma Jamida's youngest son, Ashraf Kababa, who had been living with her and had been studying at a secular school. And when I went to the village to pick him up, Musebeeyi was happy.

As Mamma Jamida neared death, she had assigned the responsibilities for her children among her brothers and her one sister (my Mamma). Kababa had been sent to our youngest uncle, Nohu Kababa. Uncle Nohu was not happy when he learned that I had taken his son without consulting him and he traveled to Kampala

to look for Kababa and me. Everyone at the university mosque was telling me that some uncle of mine was looking for me because I had done something wrong in the village. When he finally found me he had no reasons to explain himself, as he just took Kababa with him back to the village and the scholarship was lost.

Kababa's plight was sad and disappointing, an experience exacerbated even more by the loss of the central family stability that is so critical when there are healthy parents available. Indeed, it is a nearly unspeakable cruelty to witness just how much long-term devastation occurs in the pandemic of AIDS. At the surface, one can see how the disease has ravaged once-healthy vibrant individuals who die so mercilessly at a time when they normally would be in the prime of their lives. However, what is so quickly forgotten is that the worst pains of the illness extend well beyond the time when the unfortunate patient takes his or her last breath. And, ironically, Kababa might even have seemed like one of the lucky ones. But the pandemic has wreaked so much damage that one wonders just how millions upon millions of Ugandan children orphaned as a result of the shadows of AIDS left upon their families can ever manage to survive and thrive as adults. And, in Dubai, these personal experiences went much further than perhaps my editors or even readers have realized in shaping and influencing how I, as a professional journalist, decided to cover the effects and impacts of this disease in Dubai and throughout the Emirates.

The other thing is that, in the 1990s, most of the generation who had been orphaned as a result of the disease were now themselves succumbing to it, leaving behind yet another generation of children without parents. Even recently, in 2012, I had learned yet of another child of a relative who earlier had died of AIDS being laid to rest in Bukkogolwa, succumbing to the same disease. I learned of his death when I called his phone one morning to inquire if he had found a classmate doctor I had recommended a week before who could help.

A female voice answered my call in Luganda with a low, tired and sad voice: "*Gwe ani, ono afudde*!" This was translated as "Who are you? This one has died."

It was one of my aunts, and I kindly requested her to switch off his phone. I immediately called other relatives to see if I could help arrange for the burial, as family members had just finished settling the bill at the hospital where he had died. That afternoon I asked my colleagues in the office after the *Aswir* prayers I had led to join me again to pray on behalf of my relative's behalf the Islamic *Swalat Janaazat*. They asked me the names of the dead and then the cause and I hesitated to utter it for fear of being embarrassed and ridiculed. One of my colleagues, Salah Al Arabi—who was from Egypt—guessed from my reticence that the cause, indeed, was AIDS. One learned to be discreet, believing that mentioning AIDS as the cause of death in this particular country was taboo.

And as I prayed my heart had already moved on from mourning my cousin—who had been a good friend—to thinking like my grandmother Musebeeyi about what would happen to his children. One had to consider that this new wave of orphaned children would have to live without grandparents. My grandmother Musebeeyi, who was more than eighty years old, now would look after the great-grandchildren as well after the orphaned grandchildren. I certainly had the spirit and all of the enthusiasm to help but I also understood with practical regret that I could not help every orphan of a relative, even if I would be able to dedicate all of my income toward this goal. There already were orphans staying in my mother's Matugga home that I had declared to take on but assuming the responsibility for others would have been a nearly impossible challenge to undertake successfully.

The fears of failing after declaring to father someone were personally betraying and with the lingering insecurity about sustaining gainful employment in a new land only made those fears that much more acute. At points like these, where one seems on the verge of utter helplessness, one can justifiably become deeply angered by the laissez faire, lackadaisical, urgent-free attitude our governments take with regard to these domestic health crises. And, the anger soon reaches other sources, not the least of who are the multinational pharmaceuticals that have the potential infrastructure capacities to make available globally the whole range of therapeutically effective anti-retroviral medications that have been show to

alleviate and even control the spread of AIDS to the point that one can conceivably manage the ramifications of this disease. Certainly, at the minimum, these drugs would significantly bolster the prospects of individuals to be healthy enough and to live long enough to ensure they see their children succeed and move on from their formative years.

Every year when I return for vacation to Uganda from Dubai, I can expect to visit family members to say my condolences for at least three people who have passed away during my absence. One or two of these dead is likely to be an AIDS victim, which makes me doubt seriously the authoritative statements that Uganda has made progress in controlling and reversing the spread of AIDS.

Chapter 46

What kind of improvements can possibly happen when every day we are burying loved ones while we remain content to merely politicize the disease in order to give Museveni (the Ugandan leader) a respectable reputation. The reason why there are still children orphaned today by the AIDS crisis is attributable to lack of awareness and persistent poverty. The explanation hardly can be simpler. Campaigns for awareness should not be directed exclusively to the educated alone, as most of these orphans have not gone to school and the girls, in particular, are left hopelessly to subjugated roles in the community because of poverty. Meanwhile, the boys still cannot afford to buy the largely commercialized condoms every time they contemplate engaging in sex, and the frequency of these decisions is more than most people would be willing to acknowledge.

These are the unskewed realities in a country that Museveni has ruled for almost thirty years. Museveni once guest authored an op-ed published in *The Wall Street Journal* in which he argued that a feasible approach to the AIDS/HIV pandemic should focus on behavioral changes. I actually thought the suggestions reasonable and agreed with the piece. Yet, Museveni is an intelligent leader with good ideas that he would never put into practice. An astute reader of this particular op-ed would easily notice that, at the time of the piece, Museveni was not actually addressing Ugandans but Americans and then-president George W. Bush for Uganda's share of $94 million in the $15 billion package the U.S. government pledged to fight AIDS on the African continent.

The piece opportunely provided the platform for Museveni to the Americans on behalf of his cronies who would later assuredly embezzle all of these funds for their own non-altruistic purposes. And he slyly deployed his best coded language to assure the Americans that he was doing something in the fight against AIDS, another milestone in a fallacy he had mastered to perpetuate so skillfully during the three decades he led the nation.

But the good president also was not going to participate in this change campaign more than the words with which he tried to mollify his international readership. The rhetoric of behavioral change

has recently been adopted even among many AIDS activists but the problem has remained that no one is willing to implement the strategic tactics that would cultivate the environment for these changes. There are two reasons for this persisting reluctance. One arises from the profit a few can hope to gain that arises from those who insist upon over-indulging these risky behaviors. In other words, in advocating a behavioral change one then would have to attack the market demand for the sort of free-wheeling entertainment, alcohol and recreational drugs that often is associated, to one degree or another, with heightened risks for contracting the HIV virus and for the compromising health conditions that would make one vulnerable for AIDS. The powerful corporate interests have already invested deeply in all these fields and, thus, anyone attacking them would have to prepare for a substantive battle on another front fighting the often-invincible powerful elites who have much at stake in our increasingly globalized economy.

The second constraint to be considered is that overindulgence in these risky behaviors preoccupies the minds of those who already are so distracted that they cannot think about the mess in their daily routines their respective rulers, prime ministers, and presidents fail to manage which complicates one's ordinary existence. Leaders such as Museveni would mostly take a liberal stance or hide within the mantle that indicates there is no law to prosecute those who gladly have become purveyors of licentious entertainment in Uganda. I still remember one conference while at Makerere University in which I asked a panel discussant about his comments regarding this situation. I mentioned that even the brief detentions of Uganda's nude dancers were not carried out for the purpose of discouraging the practice, but rather for drawing attention to a promotional or marketing stunt.

Reporters mentioned in detail the skimpy pink-colored clothing that barely adorned the dancers' bodies and left little to the imagination. Reporters did not hesitate to provide even more salacious details, even mentioning how the women were completely naked when they were arrested. Eight years after that conference, one easily could see that the sight of nude dancers had grown more frequent in more of Kampala's nightclubs and these features were getting a good bit of coverage in the country's tabloids. In

addition, the nude dance exhibitions have become more daring, evolving into live staged sex shows and no authority dared to raise a word about these so called "private shows" in Kabalagala, Wabakuri, Ndeeba, and other areas.

Few reports, however, bothered to mention that most of the women were once AIDS orphans, as the Museveni government's intelligence ops did, indeed, acknowledge that these women were victims but they did not care. After all, most of these clubs—whether located in Nakulabye or Rubaga Road, for example in Kampala—are owned by Museveni's personally favored war veterans or retired military officers, who, in Uganda, enjoy in part the privilege of being above the law.

One only has to go through the Dubai streets such as Nasser Square and Nayef to know what three decades of rule by Museveni have done to our sisters. Passing through any of these Dubai streets, hearing the Luganda language being used by most young women who are soliciting customers for sex makes one think he is passing through the Kampala slums of Kisenyi or Kisweera.

Is sex the only thing Ugandan girls can offer abroad, Mr. Museveni?

Or still, Mr. Museveni, you don't care because none of them is your daughter or even a relative?

Your daughters have good professional jobs and own several companies in Uganda, Ltd.

Yet, sadly, most of these young women are also graduates of Uganda's higher institutions that became unwittingly tempted prey of untouched pimps who knew how to manipulate the vulnerabilities associated with state-managed conditions of poverty. They sold the women on slyly masked falsehoods in order to lure them to Dubai roads. Many of them still remain trapped in fear of being beaten by their pimps, or being deported by the Dubai police should they present themselves and be forced to return to Museveni's state of poverty.

They carry tales of their sex work that no decent human being would wish to hear. Once these innocent women are bought, their plight falls into the hands of the buyer as well as those found in his home whom they cannot report for any violations. They face gang rapes or are forced to sleep with animals like uncared-for dogs, a practice some cultures in the multicultural Dubai

environment would allow despite all the evidence of progressive modernity. Many of these women have talked to me about their plights, speaking to a reporter who cannot publish any of their stories, because all of the newspapers he works for would not want to risk antagonizing the government. One can feel their desperation when they say they would rather die than continue to live like semi-humans. Or, when they vow never to have children because they feel their wombs full of animal semen and are no longer worthy to carry children. And, yet despite these deplorable conditions, many in Uganda are willing to risk the worst negatives in their struggle to come to Dubai in order to find some modicum of economic justice.

THE COLOR OF MY SKIN

Chapter 47

One of my neighbors in Sharjah, a Nigerian man in his early forties, stopped to tell me what happened to him the previous day. The man, who has five children, had been prevented from leaving a supermarket in the Nabba area.

Apparently, the storefront door came down with a loud bang as he tried to exit, but then the same thing happened when he tried to leave through another doorway. "I felt so embarrassed being called a thief in the audience of all my neighbors," he said. An Indian man, who managed the shopping center branch office, called police and my neighbor could hear the manager giving directions to the store. My Nigerian neighbor was treated rudely, as the manager slapped him in the face and held him by a loop in his trousers so he could not escape. Four supermarket employees surrounded this unfortunate victim, while a crowd gathered at a nearby window. He asked the manager why he was being detained and the only response was another slap in the face and a curt statement that the police were on their way. The manager told him if he was not a thief then he would have been shouting back like Africans, an expected cultural norm. The manager also claimed that if indeed the man fully believed that he was mistaken for another, then he would have assisted the manager in tracking down the suspect. First to arrive on the scene was a Sudanese man in civilian clothes but believed to be a CID official. He demanded that the Indian manager release his grip on the man's trousers, adding that he had no right to detain him like that. He also demanded that somebody explain why the man was being detained. Several uniformed police officers arrived shortly and followed the Sudanese agent into the supermarket, reiterating the agent's initial queries. The Indian manager told the authorities he had nabbed a thief, while he ordered an employee to bring the closed-circuit camera footage for review. The video showed a black man moving through the aisles and the shelves of the supermarket, picking up various goods. The man shown in the footage clearly was not my Nigerian neighbor who was being detailed. The police confirmed his identification and then asked if he wanted to press charges against the manager for slapping him but

he refused to do so. He just wanted to be let go as the police and the Indian manager apologized.

The Nigerian man added that he did not want to be identified any further in the press. He believed he already had suffered enough as a victim of racism and didn't want to even risk the mistaken perception or connection some might make just by the mere association or use of the word "thief."

However, most Africans in the neighborhood were disappointed that he opted not to press charges, arguing his story needed highlighting. Neighbor and neighbor repeated his concern about failing to come to terms about the rash, impulsive rush to profile possible suspects first on race instead of sound investigative work free of circumstantial evidence. Furthermore, they were critical that the police felt it sufficient to placate the man whose civil rights had been so seriously compromised by asking if he wanted to press charges against the manager specifically for the fact that he was slapped on his face.

I listened but cautioned them that, in my experience as a journalist, that while I had heard plenty of anecdotes I had not yet heard or seen statistical or data-driven reports of any trends of racist profiling cases being reported ever in this country. One of them told me he was advising his relations to boycott the market, something I also asked of my family. Nevertheless, their concerns were so emotionally impassioned that I decided to pitch a follow-up story to my editor concerning the incident at the supermarket. I decided that I would first speak to the store manager and then I would interview the police. The next morning, as I entered the supermarket, I was anxious, if not a bit afraid. I asked a nearby cashier for the manager and he directed me an office assistant, who said the manager had not yet arrived for the day. The assistant also mentioned that the manager would not be the one responsible to speak to the press. Instead, he directed me to the store's main branch in the Sharjah Buhairah area. I decided then to interview the police initially.

The police PR contact was Lt. Mohammed Al Amin, a black man from Sudan. Off the record, he was disturbed by the details of the incident but he added that there was little he could do or offer. "If am to help, Yasin," he explained, "that man has to first make the case with police and then we could speak about

the concerns of racism." At this point, all I had confirmed was a story of mistaken identity. The lieutenant called the operations room to see if there were additional details on the case and the Heera precinct station was on point for further information for the case. Immediately after, the lieutenant kindly asked that our conversation go once again off the record and he wanted to speak as one African man to another.

"The problem with us being abused because of our color lies with our governments," he said. "If this man was an American, the Indian would have thought twice and if he still decided to beat on him, his country's consulates and embassies would be on it now. But who in our government would care if you are beaten or I am myself killed here?" He was right. Our respective governments in our home countries did little, if anything, on behalf of the citizens who were working abroad not only here in the Emirates but elsewhere. They seemed more interested in keeping good relations for the purposes of staying in financial good grace with a country that treated the rights of expatriates with cavalier abuse.

After I left the lieutenant's office, I went directly to the supermarket's main office. An Indian manager there did know about the arrested African but not about the mistaken racial profiling at the store. He recommended that I return to the branch and speak directly to the manager. This had turned into a circus of evasive acrobatic moves where no one would sit still long enough to be accountable. Prior to continuing, I returned to my editor's office, who agreed that the story still lacked the solid confirming angle needed to run it. I also told the staff at the *Al Ittihad* office about the story, and one of my reporter colleagues (Tahreer Al Amiri) offered some unsolicited advice. "You are not the spokesman of black people in this country; just forget those stories that would put you in problems," she advised. "Here we know so many things in which the abuser would go free because it would be more damaging for the victim to say it happened than to keep quiet."

Of course, I also knew some of these abuses and did not need an example from her. I knew she was referring mostly to social abuses affecting women, rather than those involving skin color. I found it ironic that she believed it best to stay quiet. I knew an Indian man in my building who always immediately left the lift

whenever I entered it. One could only believe that his behavior was because of some irrational fear of a darker-skinned human being in such close quarters. After the incident I told my Nigerian neighbor about him and he mentioned the same experience at the lift. I decided the next time I entered the lift and he did the same thing, I would lecture him, which I did. I indicated that in Africa, there were many Indians and they always have been treated with the utmost respect and courtesy, and they never hesitated to be in the same space with us at the same time.

The Indian neighbor apologized but his behavior never changed. Whenever I entered the lift, he left abruptly, even as I knew that the stop was not his.

Chapter 48

I was driving in my car, listening to a popular radio talk show called "Al Rabea Wa Nnasi," hosted by Abu Rashid, one of the most popular Emirati presenters. A woman calls describing how her son was misdiagnosed twice with HIV and AIDS yet what he had was cancer instead. Unfortunately, health ministry officials refused recommendations from the son's doctors to let him go abroad for treatment. The woman was clearly distressed, her voice choking frequently with tears as she tries to get answers about why the ministry officials are so adamant in their refusal to let her son explore his treatment options. Even as I arrived at my office, the woman was still on the air talking to Abu Rashid. Her call demanded my attention as I wondered how an Emirati citizen in critical condition could be denied a chance to live, especially when I knew of many cases of Emiratis going to Europe or the United States for treatment of conditions that certainly were nowhere as dire as this woman's son.

Later in the day, I relayed the story to an Emirati friend to see if, indeed, the woman's claim was credible. He immediately recognized the details and confirmed that the woman had spoken credibly. In fact, I learned that the woman's family was *Khawali*. The term was unfamiliar to me but he explained that they were Emirati who had the same color skin as with me. He repeated the name so I would have the correct pronunciation. It is *Khali* in singular and *Khawali* in plural. My friend also mentioned that the office of Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum—the crown prince of Dubai—called during the same talk show, offering to help out with the son's travel to Europe for treatment.

There was a major follow-up to the story. The Dubai ruler ordered the UAE vice president and prime minister Sheikh Mohammed to fire the minister of health (Dr. Hanif Hassan) and appoint Mr. Abdul Rahman Mohammed Al Owais, then the minister of culture, youth and community development, as interim. However, only the Arabic tabloid *Emarat Alyoum* relayed the news. *The National* followed the

Arabic tabloid two days later but other papers ignored the shake-up, instead highlighting prominently the news about the crown prince's generous offer to help the young man.

A week later I again was listening to the same talk show while I was driving. A caller was thanking the Dubai royal family for assisting the family of the Umm Al Quwain woman before she went off into a commentary about how she had observed racist behavior in the country. Before she could continue much further, the host cut her off, swearing the name of Allah *Bi Ikhtiramchi La Tagul Kidha Ya Huruma, Wallah* . . . ("With all respect, don't say that, woman, I swear . . .") She never had a chance to explain whether an environment of racism had tinged the circumstances concerning the Umm Al Quwain son or if she was venturing off into tangents on the topic. Abu Rashid insisted, in a tone of relief and triumph, racism had existed in South Africa and now it was all done. He also launched into his rhetorical praises of the rulers and the country, offering numerous examples of the UAE rulers breaking their fasts with poor people in Fujairah Hospital and asking loudly to the caller who no longer was on the air if she had mistaken sincere altruistic behavior for what she perceived as racism.

That same weekend, I talked to Abu Rashid at an informal meeting called by the new acting minister of health Al Owais at the Bustan Rotana Hotel. Journalists had been asked not to come with cameras or notepads, as the meeting was a casual confab off the record to discuss concerns of coverage and information gathering. Abu Rashid turned up thirty minutes into the meeting and was extraordinarily received with warm embraces by the conveners of the meeting. I did not recognize him as I had never met him before. The minister stood to welcome Abu Rashid and offered him a seat but he refused and took another presented by a radio colleague. I asked a colleague sitting next to me Adnan Okasha of the Al Khaleej who the new celebrity was, and he told me it was Abu Rashid.

During the meeting the minister asked about problems reporters had with health officials who they claimed stonewalled them in their attempts to gather news information. Abu Rashid immediately interrupted with his usual radio rhetoric, stating the now familiar

"*Alhamuddulilalh Hadha Bilad Kheir . . . Kul Shai Kheir . . .*" (Thanks to God: this country is good and everything is good) when one of the reporters asked him to stop.

"We came here to talk about our problems and find solutions and now you are launching into lofty praises," the reporter said. "Stop it. We did not come for that here."

Abu Rashid was a man not easily forced into silence, as there was a brief testy exchange until the minister cut in and asked the journalist to explain his problems. Other journalists joined in, demanding the minister decide whether to listen to their grievances as agreed to for the subject of the meeting or to the flourishing eulogies of Abu Rashid.

Chapter 49

Dubai always has boasted about being the penultimate cosmopolitan emirate that welcomes all kinds of people, nationalities, and colors. However, especially for those from Africa or the Indian subcontinent who move to the rich desert emirate, they find their lives are eerily similar to their homelands. Greeting anyone in Dubai is not complete without the question "From which country?" or "Where are you from?" Others are even more abrupt, just cutting out all the possible words in the question and barking out, based on skin color or accent, "India?" "Nigeria?" "Pakistan?" "Africa?" In Dubai, where one comes from matters most prominently and the response to that question will dictate the network of friends and social contacts the expatriate can expect to cultivate. It is the single most important signifier of the trust one can expect in a relationship.

For those coming from Nigeria, the transplanted Africans are likely to have few friends or people willing to trust them because the general image of Nigerians in Dubai is that of a dangerously violent people known to be cheaters who enjoy running scams. A Nigerian friend, a salesman in a local bank, told me once while we were studying at Preston University that he lost several clients by just mentioning his country on the phone though he was afraid to tell his boss. "One Emirati man told me he had lost a lot of money with Nigerians and could not accept a loan from a bank whose salesman is a Nigerian," he told me. "I offered to show even my ID and urged him to please call the bank to confirm I was genuinely working with them but nothing could win the man's confidence. He just told me he wondered how I had got employed by a reputable bank."

In Dubai, urban myths abound. All blacks are from Nigeria. All blacks are criminals. If someone asks if one is from Africa, what they are really asking is if the person came from South Africa. In Dubai, many believe that Africans cannot be trusted. They are poor "Miskin" fellows and if one is rich then he must be a cheater. The black people would always raise their eyebrows wherever they are even without doing anything wrong. An Emirati colleague in our *Al Ittihad* office brought a copy of a newspaper containing a story about a Nigerian team that had won Dubai prisons' football league championship in 2011. My colleague said this was the first

positive story he had ever seen about Nigerians in this country but he also reminded me that they had won in a league of prisoners. I just replied I still didn't believe that Nigerians had outnumbered every nationality of prisoners in those desert cells.

On another occasion another reporter—this one from Egypt—brought to me a story about Heifa Wehbe, a Lebanese pop vocalist whose new song "Baba Feen" used the "Nubian Monkey" reference that many Emirates and others do not hesitate to use regarding the Nubian tribes in Egypt and Sudan. The story focused on how the Nubians were so annoyed about the song and the reporter wanted to know if I found the song offensive. However, before I could say a word he declared that he was incapable of comprehending the reason for any critical anger. "It was just a song," he repeated. However, I wondered how he would respond if a similar song would be released in the United States, containing similar references to Arabs in general. But that is how many Emiratis envision these circumstances. And like every other country in the world, their expressions of racism against others is legitimate and generally innocuous but similar degrees of racist expressions against them would justifiably be regarded as deeply offensive and as demanding in terms of a major response.

Yet, these prejudices not only target Africans. When I was covering labor strikes in Dubai while working with *The Gulf Today*, one senior police official at the scene said what he believed was behind the strikes: "These Indians are bringing their culture of striking to our country. Our country was very peaceful with all people obedient to our beloved rulers but now see what the Indians are doing to it."

One time an Arab colleague asked me where I lived and I responded that it was the Nabba area, just near Rolla and he was surprised. "Rolla? What did you just say? That is a place for the unemployed Indians or the workers that escaped from their sponsors," he said. "Do you live there with your family? You have to take care of your family, or those people could easily assault your wife and children." I had lived in the area for about three years and while I reported on several crimes of assaults and kidnapping, they were not always perpetrated by Indians.

When I was doing my driving lessons my instructor was a Pakistani named Ashfaq. He once arrived for a driving lesson carrying

a traffic fine slip, telling me that an Emirati officer had given him the fine even though he was just standing, waiting to take a passenger in his car. He had activated his double indicator hazards as customary so he believed that the fine was nothing more than a racist-motivated act. He explained that he tried to plead to the officer but the only reply he got was "You Pakistanis are stubborn and this fine is the only language you understand."

I reminded him that he had the same skin color as Emiratis, so there was no conceivable way that the fine was racially motivated. He asked me what I thought it was. I mentioned that it likely was discrimination. However, I realized immediately afterward that the definition of racism involved far more complexities than what seemed apparent at the surface. In general, in Dubai, the subject of racism often is confused with tribalism, which is more likely to be associated with discrimination and similar types of experiences.

Social class in the UAE is highly structured and hierarchical, even among Emiratis. One often hears how one individual is from a large family, or from a powerful family. No doubt, nepotism is widespread, and reaches even into many governmental departments. For example, if the director was an Al Marri, one easily would find many other Al Marris heading up other units with the same department. It is widely accepted practice.

Racial prejudices in the UAE also are among the determining influences behind how promotions and salaries in most institutions are handled. The whites—especially from the United Kingdom and the United States—are considered smart by Emirati Arabs and thus, always are likely to receive almost double the salaries of what others from different racial or ethnic backgrounds can expect. The Arabs—especially from Lebanon, Syria, or the Gulf—rank closely behind the whites and can expect a reasonable salary. In most institutions Indians are considered cheap labor and are paid the least, even when they perform the same job or are even better than their white counterparts. Blacks from the African continent still are rarely employed in higher-level jobs. In most cases, they can expect the lowest salaries, below what is paid to Indians.

Chapter 50

Sadly, most of these prejudices have extended to worshipers in the mosques. The mosque imams in Uganda always emphasized that, in setting up lines of people in prayer, worshippers should be aware to let a leg touch a neighbor's leg, and be positioned shoulder to shoulder so that there were no gaps in the prayer line. The imam would carefully pass through all lines to ensure that this arrangement was fulfilled in accordance with the Prophet's expressed tradition. In earlier times, worshippers going to a mosque of the strict Tabligh sect—which had severe sectarian differences with others—risked being ejected if they did not follow these orthodox arrangements in prayer lines.

In Dubai I found that few people would permit my leg to touch theirs or my shoulder. What disturbed me was that even a neighbor on my left who had connected his right leg to another neighboring worshipper was hesitant to connect his leg with mine on the right. Neighbors of Arab origin were mostly more hostile on this point, and I had noticed at least three times when a neighbor changed his place in order not to be close to me. Of course, not all Arabs did this and I certainly do not mean that all Arabs are or were racist because of my descent.

Many Arab men, in fact, treated me like a brother. I stayed for three years in the same house with Yemenis and we certainly were like brothers. In the *Al Ittihad* office where I worked, likewise, my Arab colleagues treated me equally. But whenever I met an Arab who distanced his leg or changed his position during mosque prayer to avoid me, the gesture pained me greatly. It was as if they irrationally feared being transformed into a black man because they were so close to me during prayers.

Yet, there were welcoming incidents and one of the most memorable occurred at the end of my first year at Dar Al Khaleej's *The Gulf Today*. I went to Mecca for Umrah and it was my first holy journey during the last ten days of Ramadan. I went by bus, which took about thirty hours to reach Mecca. The religious lead in the bus insisted that everyone went to the *Kaaba* before going to sleep. My three Bangladesh roommates defied

the recommendation and slept first but I walked to the mosque, because I wanted to follow every instruction to the last letter. I prayed the *fajr* (morning) prayers and then embarked on the *umra* rituals of circling the *kaaba* seven times. I then went to Safwa and Marwa and repeated the ritual but it was here where I found myself in trouble. After circling three times I collapsed and a young Arab man, who was about twenty, helped me regain my stance. He held me so close in an embrace, which surprised me, and I then sat down to relax for a few minutes. I regained my bearings and he was still there with me, asking about my hotel and I showed him my room keys. He said he would escort me, as he knew where the hotel was located. He was a Saudi national and often frequented the place so it did not affect him cutting between his rituals. The next day he returned to my hotel and left a handwritten note in Arabic at the reception desk, inviting me to break the fast with their family.

In the evening, he arrived to pick me up, and his brother was along, and they both kissed me on my forehead. At their family's home there were many relatives and friends some who either kissed me on my hands or on my forehead. It was a strange experience for me because I had always worked and met Arabs in Dubai and even while they kissed their Arab colleagues, they only shook my hands.

Throughout the days I spent in Umrah I saw this embracing ritual repeated constantly: Pakistanis welcoming Indians and Arabs following in welcoming Iranians. The Umrah experience taught me a lot of how we Muslims tend to neglect important practices that serve to unite us and only exercise these gestures in limited places and times. I remember clearly the expressions of generosity that Dubai people show in the holy month of Ramadan. Rich people open up their posh houses to the poor to enter and break their fasts with them. Meanwhile, standing near the same house in another month, one would be asked to leave immediately or risk prosecution for trespassing or loitering.

How can we be brothers only in Mecca or just during the holy month of Ramadan? For the ten days I stayed in Mecca and Medina, my skin color did not grab the attention as it always did in

Dubai, where just entering a conference room or mosque would direct all eyes toward the darker-skinned person as if a goat had entered the space. In my many history lessons, I heard about segregated churches, places of worships divided upon the basis of one's skin color. This was not something in my formative experience but in Dubai I was constantly reminded that Muslims were not at all immune from the sorts of attitudes where racism could fragment unnecessarily all the greatest spiritual and noble aspects of our common religion.

Chapter 51

The Arabs in the *Al Ittihad* office have always been kind as they accepted me to be the imam whenever the office manager was not around. But still many called me "Obama" because they thought I resembled the American president. I once told an Emirati colleague that when I was at a university in Kampala, there were only a few Muslims at campus and every Muslim was called Osama, a name one readily accepted just as I accepted the Obama reference in Dubai. I sensed he was embarrassed and I added that the only significant distinction to me was that the two names differ in just one letter.

One day the office discussion turned to African women, the sort of exchange that would happen only when all female employees had left the workplace. The Emirati men and their Egyptian colleagues asked me if I could get them an African woman. I responded that they would have to reciprocate by getting me an Arab woman. The whole office went silent and most of their faces reddened with anger and the conversation ended. For the next two days some of them were still angry with me, not even bothering to respond to my greetings of *Salaam Allaikhum*. Then one Egyptian friend, a fellow refugee from Dar Al Khaleej—whom we had been quite close and free to talk about everything—asked me out for a smoke. I was not a smoker but the designated area was ideal for having a private chat.

"Yasin, me and you are best friends and I need to give you one important advice of how to stay on good terms with Arab friends, if you don't mind," he said, with a faint smile on his face, the kind signaling that he, too, was as progressive as me. "If you are in any conversation with Arab men and they ask you to get them African girls never tell anyone that you also want an Arab girl. I am telling you this because I know how upset some people got with you there the other time. Most of these Arab men are very conservative and can't take it to learn that you or any African is interested in any Arab girl."

Conservative is how he described his other friends excluding himself naturally but from that evening's experience he did not act

any differently. He might as well have cut off most of our chats and jokes we always made in office just because of the statement I made which apparently had deeply offended my colleagues. In fact, I had a feeling this man—who I thought was among my best friends—was, in fact, the most hurt by the statement and that is why he had ignored me for two days.

Still, he continued chatting about his interest in African women. He wanted to know which African countries or tribes had the best women, how to find a woman while on a trip in an African country, and what about the black women in Dubai. Whenever he sensed some reluctance in my responding to his questions, he would apologize, telling me that I could say, like my Arab counterparts, that I did not want to discuss our respective women in such a casual or frivolous manner. We were friends because we had worked together before but his latest interests in African women actually created a stronger bond between us.

One day he wanted to compare African and Arab women, and he asked me why so many African women were in the sex trade in Dubai and if they followed similar activities in their home country. He also wanted to know how parents reacted if they discovered their daughter was a prostitute. I queried him about if he knew of any hotels and night clubs in Dubai that had Arab prostitutes, but he dismissed my question, responding that I should forget about those ones in Dubai, and that we were just talking about decent women. His response seemed to infer at least awkwardly that few African women were "decent." Surprisingly he was an Egyptian but only the map indicates that Egyptians are Africans, but, in his mind, he is, more specifically and appropriately, Middle Eastern.

I explained to him that there were a lot of decent girls and women in Africa, and not all of them were prostitutes. Furthermore, I mentioned that all girls and women were the same regardless of race, color or country, adding that whatever an African woman was capable of doing under certain circumstances or opportunities, that an Arab woman could be expected to act correspondingly. Then he summed up his argument defending Arab women, saying, "You can find an African girl married to anyone, but if an Arab girl just married anyone—like marrying a non-Arab—she would be a disgrace to her family."

Chapter 52

Arabs, too, faced discrimination, even in the Emirates. For example, TLE's first decision once he took on the local news desk was to relieve the Arab Dubai bureau chief and the Indian chief reporter of their duties, demoting them to normal pool reporters even while they held onto the now worthless job titles. The poor Arab bureau chief had to start filing in daily assignments to the new de facto Dubai chief, who was keeping an account of all reporters' assignments. The Arab reporter was later rescued by his good contacts in the paper and fled to a comment desk while the Indian chief reporter joined the wires.

A year after I joined *The National*, a black Arab reporter who was Western educated and spoke with almost a British accent was recruited. He spent more than two years begging TLE to promote him and sit alongside them on the desk, as he was an Arabic speaker and familiar with Emirate culture but all of his pleadings were in vain. At this time, many editors were leaving the paper and the Western reporters who were still around were being trained to replace them. My black colleague told me later that even his salary was close to mine.

The Arab reporters who left after TLE's takeover could all cite discrimination. One told me I was lucky I did not turn up in the Abu Dhabi office daily, or I would also be resigning as the new editor screamed and sent rude emails to all Arabs and Indians. I had received more than a fair share of rude emails and screaming tantrums on the phone but times were desperate for me to move on like the others. Promotions, training and foreign media conferences or workshops, career development, pay raises, bonuses had all become the exclusive purview of Europeans and Americans on the desk. Discriminations that would not be possible to exercise in their native countries were being carried out here unabated; with assurances that the local culture of keep quiet or go away was fully in force.

The UAE is one of the remaining highly prominent countries in the world in which racists of all kinds can still put all their prejudices against others to use. Only the racists believe they are supernormal by virtue of their skin color and feel no remorse in

believing that others are inferior and, thus, do not deserve the sort of training that conceivably would put the disadvantaged in a position to overtake their superiors. It remains extremely easy for one in the predominant culture to make a member of the underprivileged, underadvantaged, or unenfranchised feeling as if he or she came from another planet. It remains astounding how the superficial details of one's country of origin or skin color dictates so much in the realms of social mobility where social equality endures as one of the most confounding challenges of communities.

Chapter 53

There were plenty of incidents that suggested racism was not so seemingly innocuous or genteel merely because of cultural misunderstandings or ignorance. In fact, some were shockingly blatant. One time, I was with six other Africans in a queue of about twenty people at a Kish Airlines office in Iran, waiting to confirm our flights. Hussein Kaloddo was one of the men and he was a friend of mine from Uganda. Meanwhile, an Indian man in his forties entered the office and tried to bypass us asking to jump in line with his friend in front of us. The Nigerians protested and he answered them with "Fuck you, black monkeys." That was enough to upend the whole office in chaos, as two Nigerians jumped from their spots in line and pummeled the Indian, sending him to the ground. Others were calling him a "brown chimpanzee" and before we knew it a police van arrived.

The officers asked all the Africans, along with the Indian man, whose nose was bleeding, to sit for interrogation. The police listened to the account and one officer suggested we settle the dispute amicably by compensating the Indian man on the spot or we risked missing our flights because the matter would then be taken to court. The Indian wanted 500 *dirhams* as compensation, but Hussein protested that the two Nigerians who hit him should pay. One declined, explaining that he had punched him only in the stomach and there was no evidence of injuries there. He added that he would only pay if the man had experienced diarrhea as a result of the punches to his stomach. The Nigerian who had punched him in the face appealed that we all should contribute as the man had abused all of us by using such offensive names. The Nigerian said he just had 200 *dirhams* (US$55) in his pockets, and at least 100 (US$27) would be needed for his upkeep and transport to the airport. Another Nigerian man offered to pay the entire requested amount and asked his friend to keep his money. The incident was settled without further events.

Appearances were enough alone to trigger memorable incidents but there were plenty of interactions that suggested why one should never judge on appearances alone. Once I was standing on a main road trying to hail a taxi on Ajman-Umm Al Qawain Road

just after a press conference at a nearby newly opened health center, when Abdullah stopped by to give me a lift in his 1992 Toyota Corolla. At first I mistook him to be an Emirati, thinking to myself that he must be a very poor one, as evidenced by motoring in a car of the previous century. This was not a normal sight for Emiratis but his Arabic accent and clothes were all perfectly Emirati.

We talked about many topics—where I had just come from to the problems of waiting for taxis and hassles I was going through to obtain my driving license and, finally, the discussion turned to our countries. He told me he was a *bidoon*, an Arabic word literally translated as "without." It was coined for those citizens who lived in most Gulf countries without documents or identities. It was not my first time to hear about the word, as I had actually done a number of stories on *bidoons* for *The Gulf Today*. I asked him where he was from originally and he told me he was from Iran but he was born in the UAE, as his grandfather had migrated here when his father was still a kid and they had lived in the UAE for many years. However, like all other *bidoons*, he had never left the UAE because he didn't have a passport. He blamed his status on his grandfather who had told them that when they arrived in 1972, they would become Emiratis if they registered. However, for some reason, he never followed through on registration.

He had an Iranian passport but soon it expired and he never bothered to even renew it. Now, legally, they had no home, no country and no rights like other human beings. During the drive from UAQ to Sharjah, Abdullah told me a great deal about his *bidoon* life. He had an older brother who worked in the municipality but earned less than 2,000 *dirhams* (US$540). He was the only one working in the family of his five siblings and the meager salary was the family's only form of support. The brother also could not be married, as no Emirati wants to marry off his daughter to a *bidoon* so he was limited to look into the *bidoon* families for marriage options. No one went to school in his family because of their status, as schools need documents. In their home only his sister managed to get married as a second wife to an Emirati man, but the family was extremely careful not to burden their in-laws with their family problems lest he divorced their sister. He believed his father's whole life had been wasted, and Abdullah feared he

would suffer the same lot. And, if he ever had children, they, too, would be very unfortunate to have a *bidoon* as their father. He told me he was looking for a job, wondering if perhaps my company was looking for a driver. We exchanged numbers and I saved it as "Abdullah Bidoon" on my cellphone.

He dropped me off on Al Khan Road near the *Al Ittihad* office where I was working. First, I had word with an Emirati journalist who I thought could pull some strings. I told him about Abdullah and his quest for a job in case he could help. He was positive and took the phone number I had just obtained.

Abdullah was among an estimated 100,000 *bidoons* who were living in the UAE. The government offered to solve the problem of their limbo status in October 2006 but the process of naturalization has been extremely slow as the country moved forward on a case-by-case basis. In the first wave, only 1,294 *bidoons* were given citizenship. *Bidoons*, too, have been unfortunate victims of image demonizing. There have been several crimes—especially robberies and drug trafficking—associated with the *bidoons*. Some of it, of course, is a by-product in a set of circumstances where people are born and living in a wealth country but, because of a status uncertainty not of their own doing, are left without jobs and education.

When another governmental offer to register all the *bidoons* was announced in 2008, I was among the journalists that covered the process in both Sharjah and Ajman. That morning at the Sharjah Al Taawun mall, the whole place was packed with *bidoons*. There were hundreds upon hundreds of *bidoons* who had rushed that morning to registration facilities to resolve their long limbo status and obtain the essential residency documents.

Among the *bidoons* I interviewed that day at Sharjah was Ahmed, who did not want his last name used—an extra precaution he took to ensure nothing would get in the way of him being naturalized. We started our interview as he showed me his five teenaged children—four girls and a boy. The children did not attend school because they had no documents, as he wondered aloud about what their future would be in a world of rapidly evolving technology. Ahmed was not certain about his real country of origin, as his father told him their grandfather was a *bedouin* who came from either Yemen or Saudi Arabia and had settled in the lands during

the 1950s, which were now referred to as the UAE. Ahmed said that he was an Arab in all respects and an Emirati, specifically. He worked as a police officer but his salary was far smaller than what other Emirati police officers with documents earned. "Even you, a nigger, you are better than me here in my land where I was born," he said, pointing at me. I immediately corrected him that I was not a "nigger," a word that triggered laughter among his family. He apologized for uttering the word and I regained my composure so we could continue the interview.

"What we did to deserve all this discrimination?" he asked me "Do you still think these people are really good—treating us like this?" Before I responded to his query, I called my photographer to give him the location so he could snap a photo of Ahmed with his family. I could understand Ahmed had referred to me as a "nigger" just to indicate to me the magnitude of his dissatisfaction but I also wondered how anyone would complain of being discriminated against and yet be racist to others.

There were other encounters with *bidoons*. I was in Ajman court one day, covering a case with my friend Salah Al Arabi when the judge passed a verdict on thirteen male Emirati members of a family and a *bidoon* for sodomizing a Pakistan man they believed was having a relationship with one of their female relatives. The men had kidnapped the Pakistani and kept him in an isolated home, beating and sodomizing him repeatedly as they recorded their acts on phone cameras. We had covered several stories of Arabs sodomizing men before but here was a twist: some Emiratis were related to some *bidoons* and would conspire to wreak revenge if they were offended by a foreigner who was having intimate relations with one of their woman relatives.

There were other incidents that served to provide a complex portrait of how racism manifested itself in what was publicly promoted as the world's most cosmopolitan paradise. Huda was an Ethiopian social worker who helped a number of Ethiopian maids with court procedures and translations. She called me after learning from her contacts that I was an African journalist working for *The National* who would be interested in reporting on the case stories for which she worked. One story involved an Ethiopian maid who had been attacked and raped by an Emirati youth whose

family she was serving. The maid was apparently doing her morning prayers on bended knees when she was attacked. The attack occurred when the young suspect returned home after an alcohol bender. Huda and I met agreeing that she would share details of these case stories but, unfortunately, most of her stories about battered expatriates were limited in detail that there was often no more information than what would be found in a brief news item.

Occasionally, she called to ask why the story we had worked on so much together had not been published or why it was published just as a small brief. She would compare the same story published in our paper with a much larger piece that was published in *Khaleej Times*, written by a Sudanese reporter who was also her contact.

Huda was quick to fix blame. According to her, an African like herself would forge solidarity with an African confederate to publish a story about the plight of the exploited poor, especially those involving African nationals. Of course, I was deeply disturbed by what I heard and I cared that some semblance of justice would be exacted. That was precisely why I often dedicated my time to go out with her to talk to victims or attend court hearings but then again I was just a reporter. And, my professional obligations as a reporter did not extend to deciding the size or length of a story or which story was to be published because editors carried that responsibility. And, the reality in Dubai, as I'm sure it is the case in many other regions, editors, too, are answerable to powerful authorities, interests, and stakeholders that have sufficient capacity to drive the editorial agenda and to decide which news values will be framed most significantly in the ongoing coverage in their publications.

There was one incident that especially stood out among the cases Huda shared. She had tipped me about a court hearing for four Emirati men who were charged with raping and killing an Ethiopian maid in an especially brutal way. The defendants were charged with rape, murder, drinking alcohol and attempting to cover up their crime. The four men kidnapped the maid in Khor Fakkan, taped her mouth closed, forced her into their four-wheel-drive land cruiser and took her into the desert. They allegedly raped her in Khor Fakkan before putting her back in the vehicle and driving her to the Al Dhaid mountains where they apparently raped her again. The court heard that they then drove the vehicle

over her head, crushing her skull on impact, and then tried to cover the body with rocks before leaving the scene. The description was horrendous enough to unsettle the judge (Yaqoub al Hamadi) who was handling the case. He asked the suspects, "Did none of you at all have the slightest kind of mercy in your hearts?" All four suspects bowed their heads and did not reply. He postponed his verdict until the beginning of the week on Sunday, when an Indian national who claimed to have witnessed the incident in Al Dhaid was scheduled to testify.

There was plenty of additional disturbing information. According to police, one of the accused earlier had raped and killed a three-year-old Pakistani girl twelve years before in the desert near Masafi in Fujairah. He and two other men were sentenced to death, but he was later freed after the girl's guardian forgave him on compassionate grounds. The other two men, however, were executed. This fact made the suspect's current circumstances that much more abhorrent.

One of the most emotionally affecting stories of maid abuses I followed in neighboring Saudi Arabia concerned LP Ariyawathie, a 49-year-old Sri Lankan woman, who had twenty-four nails and needles removed from her body. Her Saudi employer hammered the nails, as long as two inches, into her body. Of course, the victim is vulnerable because laws in the Gulf nations offer the barest of legal and safe protection to foreign workers. The immigration laws of *kaffala* or sponsorship are barely better than conditions of enslavement when itinerant workers or housemaids are involved. Everything has to be done with the consent of an individual's immigration sponsor, and those who run from an employer risk losing their legal status immediately and can be imprisoned and deported no matter what triggered an individual to flee harm's way.

When I was still young, on several occasions Mamma hired maids to watch us children while she was working. Every maid was like an elder sister—"baba" or aunt. We would never call a maid by her real name, because that was an offense that Mamma responded to by slapping us with her slippers. Unlike my father who kept a long stick to discipline his children, Mamma mostly relied on her slippers or shoes or whatever was on her feet when she believed we had breached acceptable norms of behaviors.

I tried to compare the maids in my country to those in Dubai, where a rich Emirati family often required their maids to wear a long-skirted, drab uniform that signaled their status in the home. To this day, I still think quite frequently about the mistreatments, beatings and burnings that maids would tell me about and wonder why in the name of God would some people be so heartless toward a person under their roof. They are foreigners, fine, but one certainly is not going to find Emiratis as housemaids, just as visitors will notice there are practically no Emiratis working as chauffeurs, hired cabbies, or burses. To be treated as a nonhuman was an inexcusable offense to the human dignity of the foreigners who worked so strenuously long with the barest modicum of economic justice in Dubai's extraordinarily wealthy society.

Chapter 54

In the UAE, the blood money value for an Emirati is double that for a foreigner or expatriate. When I covered Dubai police during my tenure at *The Gulf Today*, Brigadier Zeifin, the director of Dubai police traffic department, boldly proclaimed in a formal press conference the road fatalities on Sheikh Zayed Road were the result of suicide bids. He reasoned that many hopeless people wanted the 100,000 *dirhams* in blood money to be given for their struggling families back in their country. During the press conference, I reminded the Brigadier that I had actually crossed the same road when I was just a newcomer in the UAE and I was not on a suicide bid but was hunting for jobs in the media. Street dwellers directed me to cross the road and go a few kilometers into the industrial area to find the newspaper officer. In those days, the most heavily trafficked road in the UAE did not have any barriers or warnings about pedestrian crossings.

There also were no overhead pedestrian bridges in the neighborhood and in that particular instance I crossed this major thoroughfare with a couple of Asian workers who were heading to their homes for lunch. Meanwhile, the others stayed near and guided me to my destination at the KT news office. As we walked through the Al Qouz industrial area, they told me in a mixture of English and Arabic language that they always crossed that road in the morning and evening and assured me I would be safe crossing it at that point on my return. I actually crossed it at least three more times as I chased the job in the two media houses.

However, at this press conference, Zeifin was making a sweeping generalization about suicide bids driving the number of road fatalities on this busy stretch of traffic. But, I also realized that had I been killed accidentally while crossing the police would automatically have marked me as a suicide. Zeifin though was projecting what probably many others believed that a suicide payment of 100,000 *dirhams* was worth the risk for hapless immigrants. Adding more insult to this outrageous claim was the fact that the blood money for UAE nationals was 200,000 *dirhams* and I certainly knew of several Emiratis whose lives would be changed by such a large lump-sum payment. The real disturbing revelation here was

that UAE's political leaders easily believed that the only complete human being was as an Emirati.

Zeifin's comments had more to say about the growing concerns of the other's visibility in the UAE. Then UAE launched an Emiratization campaign aimed at employing Emiratis in the private industry and public government sectors. Emiratization quotas were imposed mandating that every UAE private company must employ at least one Emirati. Quasi-government departments were required to have a majority of their staffs representing Emiratis. Departments would issue annual press releases, announcing with pride how their administrative staffs were 100 percent Emiratis.

Attending the Sharjah Consultative Council session in 2009, I took note of the board director of the Sharjah Public Transport Corporation (Mohammed Al Shamsi) who was being asked about the progress of the Emiratization initiative in the company. He responded they had a campaign to employ Emirati taxi drivers by giving them better incentives but they had failed to get any Emirati willing to take up the job. He recalled just one Emirati who had called to ask if they could hire him as a driver and the next morning he didn't turn up to sign a contract. When they called him he said he was content to remain unemployed rather than work in a non-decent job in his country. About 20,000 taxi drivers in the emirate are foreigners. However, that is not the only field where the Emiratization program has completely failed. Nevertheless, the transport director insisted that the firm had achieved more than 90 percent Emiratization in the administrative department.

Even in my employer's offices, we often would get internal job postings requiring Emiratis to apply. I was at a loss to comprehend how companies were keeping the integrity of their values of employment in terms of being competitive or hiring the best qualified person for a job. I just understood this was another rule in a bureaucratic book. The first item qualifying anyone for employment was the country of origin and it had to be the correct location in order to have a respectable chance at landing the job.

The institutional framework of racially based discrimination was extensive. Salaries were predicated not upon the skills or level

of accomplishment but instead on one's homeland. Having a casual discussion with a British photographer during an assignment, he asked me to tell him honestly how much I was paid and we were both shocked at the difference. He was making twice my salary. "Every day, I see your work and I am sure you are among the most active reporters. However, someone could not do that to you in UK and get away with it," he explained.

I told him I believed the decision-makers at our paper were either British or American. His reply was, "You know the problem here is that even British once they come here they get corrupted with the system. This is because there is some Arab manager they report to who would ask them, 'why give this much to this Indian or Lebanese or African?'"

Chapter 55

In school we always heard stories of how slaves were transported from Africa to America; how they were thrown overboard while on passage if they were found to be sick for fear that disease would spread to the white men; how they were overworked and underpaid, how their white masters owned them like property at their mercy to be punished with any means up to and including death, and how it was right for a white man to take a black woman but not vice versa.

As an adult, in UAE, the same deep sense of disturbance and trepidation that I felt in school returned whenever I heard yet another case describing how the UAE treats foreigners. How foreigners found with HIV or AIDS or any other disease like hepatitis and tuberculosis were always deported. I reported once about a Ugandan who was deported with other Africans because of a diagnosis of malaria, an illness that is successfully treatable and cured. How the *kaffala* or sponsorship system mad a foreigner dependent upon his sponsor, because no job meant immediate deportation. There were stories almost daily about women being raped by their sponsors or who were forced into desperation to be subjugated just for the purposes of having a job to maintain visa requirements. How they openly declared that marriage between foreigners and Emirati girls could not be allowed.

These stories reached into my home as well. I had returned for lunch one day and my wife told me that Latifa, my eldest daughter, returned home quite sad and said barely a word. Her mother gave her a glass of juice and returned to her laundry but when she went outside to hang the clothes to dry, our daughter was tightly huddled in a corner of our large sofa, using a small pillow to cover her face as she cried. She had not even touched her drink which her mother gave an hour earlier. Apparently, two children at her school taunted her about her dark skin. I asked my wife to stop her story there and I called Latifa, cuddled her in my lap, and asked who had abused her. She told me the name of one child but she didn't know the other because the student was in a higher grade level. I consoled her, emphasizing that she was beautiful and God and all of the family loved her.

She had yet to find her solace when she asked me, "Dad, why did God make us black?" At the age of five, my daughter in her

first year of school was already starting to be stressed by the issues that would arise concerning the color of her skin. I decided that after work that evening, the family would go out for the evening. My wife then was expecting our second child within a few weeks and she was finding it increasingly difficult to leave the home in the evening. She excused herself to stay at home and I went with Latifa to Al Qasba where she could play some arcade games.

We returned quite late and found our dinner ready. My daughter asked me, "Dad, if you pray every day all the five prayers does God change your black color?" Now I knew the color problem was taking its toll on my daughter's mind and I was lost about how to help her overcome her anxiety. I tried to convince her that the color of one's skin doesn't matter because God loves all people. She again told me that even her teacher had called her black before. This revelation took away all my reason and I resolved to go to the school first thing in the morning to register my disapproval. But when I lay on my bed I had a couple of other thoughts and somehow changed my mind. I knew complaining about the teacher to the school administrators would just alienate the situation for my daughter at school. I also knew I had nowhere to report what was a suspected incident of racism because obviously this was not news in the UAE and especially if it's done against a young African girl.

While I had thought of dealing with the teacher, how would I be able to address the problem of the children who were taunting, teasing, and even bullying her. At last I made up my mind and told my wife that our daughter would not return to that school. In the morning, I called the school administration and told them Latifa would not be returning to school and started planning our family's return to Uganda where my daughter could have a safe place in school.

Chapter 56

The call for prayer came while we were shopping at a local market in Deira, close to the Naif police station. We decided to go for prayers, with my wife and Taqiudin, our two-year-old son, heading to the women's wing at the mosque. After the prayers my wife told me Taqiudin gazed into the face of his Arab neighbor as he bent his knees and like all children Taqiudin was unashamedly curious to see what praying people did in the prostrated or kneeling positions. However, this Arab woman responded angrily, forcefully pushing my son away from her face, and he tumbled to the mosque carpet. My wife told me she thought of canceling prayers because our son was bawling loudly on the floor but then she hesitated, thinking others might perceive the action as an inexcusable protest in a mosque.

After the prayers, other women talked in Arabic to the woman involved in the incident, and it appeared from a distance that they might have been blaming her for her behavior but, in fact, all my wife could hear from their accented Emirati Arabic was the word "Ifrique" which meant Africa. Thus, it appeared that she justified her behavior because an African was involved. The others seemed to endorse her argument and, finally, one of the women spoke in English. My wife recalled that she said, "Don't bring male children into women side, not allowed." But what sort of embarrassment or disruption could a two-year-old have caused merely by curiously gazing at a middle-aged woman. Many people took their children along for prayers and my wife had seen boys of up to five years in age, praying alongside their Arab mothers. And, some were quite noisy. The haunt of differently colored skin that I had tolerated during my life in Dubai now was beginning to exact its toll on my children.

Racism seemed to be omnipresent even if it was not immediately apparently. The Arafat day occurs before Muslims celebrate the Eid Al Adha, the most significant annual celebration in Islam. On that day millions of Muslims on pilgrimage in Mecca congregate in the Arafat hill to commemorate the prophet's tradition. No pilgrim misses the Arafat day in order to legitimize the individual Hajj journey, as it marks the end of Hajj rituals. On this hill was the prophet's farewell pilgrimage where he delivered his last

sermon known as *Khutba al Wadaa* (farewell sermon). It is worth quoting a brief excerpt:

O People, lend me an attentive ear, for I know not whether after this year, I shall ever be amongst you again. Therefore listen to what I am saying to you very carefully and take these words to those who could not be present today . . . All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood. Nothing shall be legitimate to a Muslim which belongs to a fellow Muslim unless it was given freely and willingly. Do not, therefore, do injustice to yourselves. Remember, one day you will appear before Allah and answer your deeds. So beware, do not stray from the path of righteousness after I am gone.

An Emirati friend once confided to me that he had lost both his parents and had buried at least one child but he had never wept at any of their funerals. However, he added that there was not a single time when he listened to any sermon referring to the prophet's farewell pilgrimage without his voice choking in tears or weeping. He said that even when a preacher was mediocre he always found the sermon's reading moving. Muslims frequently described the prophet's last sermon as especially moving and anyone who is ever in a mosque, in which this sermon is being recited, will certainly see its visible emotional impact among the worshippers.

Yet, still I cannot understand to this day why even those deeply pious worshippers who weep at even a so-so recitation of this unforgettable prophet's sermon would still be irked and disapproving of praying next to a black man. And, no one can really explain specifically why one's skin color or one's Indian, African, or Pakistani background would qualify to be categorized as a second-class citizen.

The Muslim scholars suggest that the people who were around when the prophet delivered his powerful sermon cried as their modern descendants but people clearly do not seem to be ashamed that their behavior runs plainly counter to the prophet's profoundly expressed sentiments or that Muslim societies today are more racist than any at other time in history. That today we even find it to be a taboo to tell others that being racist is bad. That we always go to the defensive whenever the word *Alhamuddullilah* is mentioned which Islam had banned many centuries before, a sanction that we do not

follow. And, certainly this ban will not be honored in workplaces or offices, especially when managers do not hesitate to discriminate right down to ordinary matters of salary, especially in assessing the merits of a Bangladeshi or Indian employee against a British or Arab colleague.

Discrimination was not just banned by the prophet but God also had clearly indicated in the Quran how He never has considered anything less with people's race or color but their righteousness. If God rewards merit—not by matters of nationality or color—then why do the people who claim to believe in God's book get so taken into racism, nationalism, tribalism, and other forms of segregation and exclusion. Do racists believe in some of God's words and refute the others that challenge their earthly behavior? Are they not aware that even this mixture of belief and disbelief in the book of God is also condemned in the Quran? In fact, many studies had show that people accept skin color differences as normal and innately do not discriminate as a result. It is only when consciously politically-motivated social engineering enters into the picture that individuals begin to betray their innate instincts.

For the people for whom the world has always sympathized with as victims of racism are in themselves as racist when it comes to other people. Calls have persisted to stop racist prejudices against Arabs in America and Europe but no one has raised similar questions about how the Arabs or Indians treat blacks in their communities. Most Muslims always go immediately on defense when questioned about the treatment of *berber*s in the North African countries of Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania, the treatment of *bidoons* in the Gulf states of UAE and Kuwait, the treatment of blacks in Sudan's Darfur, the treatment of blacks in Iraq, and one, in fact, can indict all Arab countries.

The history of Islam is filled with stories of racial tolerance and affirmation. The prophet preached a message of equality, which inspired blacks who were once slaves to convert to the religion. We have the accounts of Billal bin Rabah, who called for prayers during the prophet's time, and Zaid bin Harith, who moved from being a slave to an adopted son and, later, an army commander and a martyr holding the flag of Muslims, the kind of mobility that would make blacks blush in the dream of such advancement. And, it was not only Zaid that led the Muslim army,

but his son Usama bin Zaid was the youngest to be appointed to lead a Muslim army by the prophet.

Regrettably, gone are those days when there was no friction or resistance to acknowledging that blacks were equal in the whole of the Muslim congregation. Muslim blacks sat close to the prophet and participated in their politics. Muslim blacks intermarried with Arabs without challenge, and one remembers Zaid marrying Zaynab, a cousin of the prophet. Today, even marriage among fellow Arabs is impossible, as the rulers of Dubai marry their daughters to rulers of Abu Dhabi and vice-versa (The daughters who cannot fit in this arrangement are matched with a crown prince in any of the northern Emirates). That we find the only name directly mentioned in the Quran of a former slave Zaid. When he divorced his wife Zaynab the prophet was ordered to re-marry her. Now she was not a virgin, as she had been married to a black man before but such stigmatizations were all laid to rest.

Every time I remember Sheikh Hood's sermons describing the features and kinds of people to dwell in hell fire forever, I have always thought that he forgot to include the racist in his peroration or perhaps that he didn't experience racism. But just sitting in one of my grandfather's sermons one undoubtedly would know if he or she had fallen because of paganism, corruption, cheating, or adultery. I remember flooding him with questions whenever we boarded our bicycles to return home from the mosque about the categories of people he had referenced in his sermons. He always complimented me for asking thoughtful questions but I still have another important question and, unfortunately, he is no longer here. I wish to ask him if in *Jannah* paradise there would be different races like brown Arabs and black Africans or white British and colored Indians.

Chapter 57

Actually at first I planned to write this book about racism in Arab communities and I conducted some preliminary research to see what was available on the topic that already had been published. I went to the Sharjah public library, requesting available books in English and Arabic. I asked the reference librarian about specific publications referencing black Emiratis, or, in Umm Al Quwain, where they were called Khawaris. I wanted to make it explicit to the librarian because I was not sure what other name references Emiratis would have for this specific group. The female librarian looked at me as if she didn't understand a single word I uttered. My Arabic always has been good, and it is classical Arabic though not an Emirati dialect but then I had never failed to be understood whenever I spoke, especially to anyone who had gone to school where classical Arabic was uniformly taught. This librarian had served me a couple of times before and it could not be that she could not comprehend my accent this time. I insisted the materials I needed were about black Emiratis—who were as black as myself—and this time she lowered her head, typed in a search query on her keyboard, and said, "No such book is there, am sorry."

"Okay, any book on racism in any Arab community?"

She returned to her keyboard and this time she turned her computer screen so I could see the results of the search query. I discerned that she had just typed in "racism" without any other qualifiers, and all the suggestions were mostly Arabic translations of American and South African racism, books that I already had read in English. I explained that I actually needed to see publications chronicling the experiences of how non-Arabs, such as Africans and Indians, were being treated in Arab countries. To this request, she volunteered a defensive answer: "There is no racism in Arab communities; Arabs are Muslims and Islam banned racism."

After a futile visit to the library, I thought about looking into Islamic literature where Muslim scholars have in the past written about racism. I turned to a mosque imam in Ajman who had become my friend primarily because I admired his Quran recitation style which resembled Matrud's, my personal favorite. Once I had attended night prayers with him and afterward, I mentioned how much I respected his recitation. He admitted listening to Al Matrud as a main influence and I told him

how I had also tried to copy the style. He offered to listen to a sample of my recitation but because I was not prepared for this I avoided reading from my memory and opened instead a copy of the Quran to the *Surat Al Maryam* and started. When I finished, he removed his wristwatch and gave it to me as a gift. He was impressed, and we met frequently as a matter of social occasion after mosque prayers. I mentioned that I was researching the literature on racism and I wondered if he knew any Islamic scholars that had written on the subject.

He had some leads, initially suggesting Taqiudin bin Tayimiyah, the popular scholar who was given the title of Sheikhul Islam. He told me the scholar had discouraged racism in his books like *Al Majmoo al Fatawa (Compilation of Fatawa)* and *Iqtida as sirat al mustaqim* ("*Following the straight path*"). He said he was a genius that had been imprisoned several times but that even while he was in prison he could still write books with accurate references to other books that he never had with him in prison. My friend told me when he died the whole city of Damascus stood still as a sign of respect for his funeral.

Another name he mentioned also was a Taqiudin. He was called Taqiudin Al Nabbani, a contemporary scholar who criticized all forms of discriminations as unIslamic. All forms of racism, nationalism and tribalism were all on his radar of criticism as he contended that their prevalence weakened the once-strong Muslim community. He also spent most of his life between prison sentences and in hiding. My imam friend told me I couldn't get any of his books anywhere in the UAE, and he was right, because the Sharjah librarian didn't find any. "All Arab leaders hate him for his works discouraging racism and nationalism," he said in a whisper, emphasizing the extraordinary sensitive and provocative undertones of my project. He thought it imprudent of me to pursue such a topic at this point.

After that meeting with the imam, I was inspired about what my next son—who would be born within five months—would be named: Taqiudin Kalule. I always teased my wife that all of her family members would bite their tongues in attempting to pronounce the name. Unfortunately, it was my family that had more trouble with the correct pronunciation. My daughter Latifa, at first, called him "Taqiudoing." My mother just chose to call him "Kalule" and my father never stopped complaining about why I had chosen the name.

Chapter 58

The meeting with the imam changed my mind from writing a book about Arab racism to penning my biography instead with a section instead focused on the general issue. Truthfully, I currently do not have the resources to travel to other Arab countries and to investigate the extent to which race-based discrimination has manifested itself and the list would include Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and others because each of these nations has a growing number of blacks in population as well as nationals of India. No doubt the issue continues to weigh heavily on my mind and I do believe it must become far more visible on everyone's radar but there are practical interests to consider as well. Undertaking such an investigative journalistic venture would require hundreds of thousands of U.S. dollars at the outset but then there is the issue of time. A reporter's life in Dubai moves at a nonstop pace and then there is the issue of having just twenty-five days of vacation every year and by the time my holiday time approaches I am already homesick to see family and friends in Uganda.

As much as I could justify the impractical logistics of devoting this current book exclusively to the issue of racism in the Arab-Muslim Diaspora, I also knew that these reasons were excuses to one degree or another. In my mind, I thought:

Perhaps I am just a coward; I was afraid of the fate that already had befallen the two Taqiudins. I never wanted to end up in a prison or as a fugitive in hiding and even if I would be killed my country would not even bother to ask why. My country had not bothered to ask questions when Madilu died or those who suffer in prisons here in the Emirates. How would I be different?

That was my heart speaking, not me. Rebelling against my mind as usual. I felt I had quite betrayed myself and betrayed all the victims of racism. I had the chance to say it aloud and no one would say it like me as I, too, was a victim. I knew how it was like for a black person to look for a job in an Arab country because I had done it. I knew how it was like to work several times harder than anyone else; take a load bigger than anyone else and get paid with wages that were well below the standard, predicated merely upon the fact of my country of origin.

The point of bringing this up is to show the human side of the equation. Immigrants are not faceless statistics. We work harder

knowing that is the case if we're to be accepted and that certainly was even the case in my Ugandan homeland when I was a university student. We know acutely well that doing a solid job day in and day out is still important for us, even as we accept the inevitable terms that our chances for career or wage mobility are quite low, if nonexistent. Even as a reporter, I would be assigned the less-than-desired assignments requiring me to secure comments or information from Sharjah officials and spokespersons who were programmed to be just as reticent with reporters from their homeland. My seniority remained invisible when the time came for promotions, raises, or assignments that would undoubtedly assist my career in journalism. And like so many others who come to Dubai from Africa or India, I knew how it was like to have no one to turn to and complain. What it was like when even my closest Indian friend—who also complained about racism—suddenly turned around and said, "it's okay, Yasin. At least you are an African with a job; many African don't have one." What he said was true but I also questioned if this was enough justification for ending this stressful query.

I remembered my Indian neighbor at home who was afraid to take the same lift with me. There were plenty of incidents and experiences that certainly would compel a book-length introspection about this topic but I was facing the decision of abandoning a book that I had already found a title for—"*the color of my skin*"—before even writing a single paragraph. I had given it that title because I knew my color mattered.

A thematic aspect of that title now sits inside this current book but the two titles are related. The relationship is that my color has mattered throughout my days in Dubai. It has mattered where I have worked, where I have lived and where I have taken walks. It was like my first *bittaqa* (documents) that most cops would immediately isolate me among all the others and ask for my *bittaqa* because they know many African people didn't have *bittaqa*. Or, others would just wave me to go without any bother because they thought they were just being kind. They knew I never had *bittaqa* because I am African but they also never wanted to cause me trouble. They allowed me to go and look for *rizk* (a living) because Africans are *miskeen* (poor). It mattered as to who I spoke to and got a response, as others would just blush signaling that I

was not worthy of their attention. Others responded out of their kindness, again thinking I was looking for help or charity, as many Africans did, but then I was just looking for a story—some information to make a report.

It also mattered if I wanted to date a woman, because no one would come. Even the women with whom I occasionally collaborated on assignments sometimes found it uncomfortable because being seen together would attract the attention of all passers-by and even people in their houses would peep through their windows. The Indian men would take it very personally, seeing an African accompanying an Indian woman but the Arabs would react to it as a deep insult. At some point, in professional circumstances, we would decide to split up and take different sources for an article so that being seen together would not cause any unnecessary and unproductive distractions that would compromise our newspaper's ability to be competitive in gathering news.

I remember one incident when I had gone to the Ajman courts for a story, being joined by my friend Salah Al Arabi of the *Al Ittihad* newspaper. We met a female Emirati reporter of another Arabic newspaper who also was attending the hearings. There were two hearings in different sections of the court so we split the duties and exchange notes after the hearings. Afterward, we sat outside on a bench and started dictating to each other whatever we had. An Arab man of about sixty or older approached us, asking why the two of us were sitting there for so long. He said it was *haram* (forbidden in Islam).

My colleague Salah was sitting with us on the same bench but talking on a phone as the Emirati reporter dictated her notes to me. She closed her notebook and asked the man what was the problem. Salah cut short his call and after a short exchange the conversation turned friendly, with the man now telling us about himself and the case of a relative he had come to court to get a follow-up. He asked if he could sit with us, and he chose to sit between the Emirati girl and me. I knew he was now feeling more at ease that he had separated us and that he was there. I told my colleagues that it was time to leave but I definitely noticed the old man's eyes fixed upon us following us to the stairwell. I told my colleagues that I was not sure if his eyes were trained on me or the Emirati reporter but there was

no doubt in my mind that he was angry. The Emirati reporter told me to leave the old man alone. Salah said he wanted to tell the man that it was *Haram* to stare at women's backs.

A fellow Ugandan journalist once told me a story about a young Emirati man who had stopped him and asked for his ID because he was walking with an Emirati female reporter. They had apparently been at the scene of a fire and they were walking back to where they had parked their cars. The man, dressed in local Emirati *kanduras*, stopped them, flashed his CID card to the Ugandan, asking for ID and inquiring where they were going. The Emirati reporter explained that they were journalists covering a fire and they merely had walked back to the parking lot together. Apparently, he was satisfied and waved the Ugandan away without even checking the ID. The story rang with an uneasy familiarity.

I would chat with the imam several more times but I never told him how I had changed my mind, fearing that he might perceive me to be a self-absorbed coward. I decided rather than rationalize with false justifications, I left the subject undisturbed. But, then there was another problem every time I was to meet him because I preferred to put on the gold-plated watch he had given me as a gift. Normally, I did not wear watches or any jewelry, but I did want to wear it as a simple expression of gratitude for his spontaneous, generous act. I noticed he wore a watch that appeared to be much less expensive than the one he had given me and occasionally I wrestled with deciding whether or not I should return the gift to him.

One day my car broke down and I needed money urgently to cover the repairs, so I took the watch to the gold souk in Sharjah and sold it. Since then I have not seen the imam again.

KINGS, PRESIDENTS, AND RULERS

Chapter 59

The UAE was founded in 1971 as a federation of seven emirates comprising Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, Umm Al Qawain, and Ras Al Khaimah.

The rulers of each emirate are members of the federal supreme council, which is responsible for choosing, respectively, the president and the vice president. A president and his vice president serve for five years and can be re-elected. Though an unofficial ceremonial post, the president has to be a ruler of Abu Dhabi and his vice-president a ruler of Dubai. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the ruler of Abu Dhabi, served as the first president of the UAE and Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai at the time, was the vice-president. The federal supreme council also elects the council ministers.

At present, Sheikh Khalifah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the eldest son of Sheikh Zayed is the current president; Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, fills the roles of vice president and prime minister.

Another important council is the Federal National Council (FNC), a 40-member panel that advises and counsels the rulers. In earlier times, the members were appointed by the rulers of each emirate but since 2006 the country has conducted elections to have twenty members elected by the Emirati people and another twenty appointed by the rulers.

Each emirate also holds some form of controlling power on its income-generating resources, including oil and precious minerals.

In my early days as a reporter, I relied on colleagues for rides before I obtained my driver's license. Abu Mansouria, an Emirati journalist and friend who had given me a lift from an evening event, suggested we stop by a friend's home where he had an appointment that would take less than ten minutes. It was the home of a son of the ruler of one of the northern Emirates. We ate and chatted for more than an hour before my friend and the Sheikh ventured outside to the verandah where they talked for a while. From watching them through the glass sliding door, I noticed that my friend appeared to be pleading for a favor from the Sheikh who was listening with rapt attention. When

they returned to the sitting room, he told the sheikh that I was going to be married in Africa the following month. This was the second time my colleague was introducing me to the Sheikh who shook my hands again, asking me what the cost of a gold dowry in Africa would be. The question surprised me, as the Sheikh looked intently at me.

I replied that the sum would likely be the equivalent of 5,000 *dirhams* (US$1,358) and he released my hand and went to his desk. He signed a sheet of paper and summoned an aide to bring two envelopes. He asked me for the spelling of my name as it appeared on my official identification. He then gave me one envelope and my friend the other and we left.

When he drove through the gate exiting his compound, my friend parked on the roadside so we could check our envelopes. In mine was a check for 5,000 *dirhams*. However, my colleague did not reveal the amount indicated on his check. Instead he blamed me for estimating such a small amount for a gold dowry. I explained to him we did not use gold for a dowry in my country. I had never bought gold before and had no idea about its price.

My colleague was unmoved. He said, "Fine, but the man you were meeting is a sheikh. Wallah, a sheikh, is the one asking you for your request—you say any money and he will give it to you. That is what you don't understand; that you will not have this chance next time." His tone sounded like he was trying to rap some lyrics.

No doubt, Abu Mansouri was among the most loyal Emiratis to the rulers I have ever met and, as a religious and friendly man, he considered the Emirates rulers a divine gift from God. Occasionally, he would tell me he doubted he would be as generous as the rulers if he himself was as rich or was a ruler.

When the case arose involving six bloggers whom the rulers accused of calling for election boycotts, Abu Mansouri was among the Emiratis who went to the capital city of Abu Dhabi to show solidarity with the rulers. I recall seeing the two always standing outside the court while proceedings continued indoors. Mansouri never failed to sing praises to the country's rulers.

One time I asked him why he had to drive the distance from the northern Emirates and he told me that everyone who attended had to register their names after court sessions.

"The ruler Sheikh Khalifa himself looks through those names. Do you know what that means?" he asked.

"No." (He intended that the ruler would give favors to those he had seen supporting him by protesting against the bloggers. In this country favors from rulers are seen as extraordinarily important.)

Throughout my stay in the UAE, I have noticed how so many Emiratis were really happy with their rulers and in comparing them with the rulers I have known, especially in my country, I believe they have a point. Only that sometimes I believe the way they show love to their rulers comes close to unconditional worship. The images of rulers on every billboard, in every office, occasionally carry praises such as, "Mankind will always thank you, His Highness, for your decision . . ." Funny that in Sharjah photos welcoming the ruler from a Paris trip for surgery in December of 2011, all billboards ended with names of a certain person and his children. The race always is on for people to be acknowledged by the rulers so to associate themselves in prominent messages welcoming the rulers equates being identified publicly as loyal supporters.

One time I had a Ugandan Imam show me several Muslim projects they were undertaking for schools and mosques and they were seeking sponsorship from the UAE sheikhs. I introduced him to Abu Mansouri and when we met in a café he told the Ugandan imam of the need to know how to praise the sheikhs before asking favors of them. He mentioned the secret in winning any sheikh's generosity was praises: "You have to be able to do it as you introduce yourself—in the middle of your conversation and at the end."

He advised him to read some Arabic praising poems and pick up the style in diction and syntax, and to listen to local radio stations, especially call-in programs as all presenters had to be skilled at this custom.

Praising was like an industry in the UAE. Beggars were making fortunes from strategically selecting the right combinations of words and broadcasters—as well as public speakers—were making careers on the art of praising.

During every holy month of Ramadan police campaigns were launched to rid the emirate of beggars but like anyone treating symptoms without caring to focus on the causes, the begging habit has continued to thrive and people in poor countries were even

borrowing or taking loans from financial companies to be in the UAE during the holy month in order to beg.

Even in mosques a successful imam had to be good at praying for the sheikhs as well. The last part of every Friday's *Khutba* is always dedicated, at first, to praying for the prophet and then for the rulers. Imams have to start by evoking Allah's mercy to the memory of deceased leaders such as Sheikh Zayed, the father of the nation, and others including Sheikh Rashid and Sheikh Maktoum of Dubai. Then the prayers would shift to the currently ruling sheikhs such as Sheikh Khalifa, the president, Sheikh Mohammed in Dubai and the ruler of every emirate then would come next, depending on the emirate where the mosque is located. For example, in Sharjah, Sheikh Sultan would come third and for those in Ajman, Sheikh Humaid would be third and in fourth place for prayers would be the remaining rulers of the emirates.

Though most of the sermons were prepared by the ministry of religious affairs and Awqaf (to help maintain strict censure of the mosque), the imam relied on his own words in praying for the leaders. The Arabic newspapers also had to carry all the long titles of every sheikh and to print prayers to every sheikh whenever one's names were mentioned. Words like "May Allah have mercy on him" were appended in the mention of every deceased sheikh's names and "May God protect him" regarding every living sheikh. The omission of anyone's title or customary prayer potentially carried the risks of heavy penalties, even if the mentions occurred in editorials. For example, Sheikh Mohammed of Dubai was addressed as "the vice president, prime minister and ruler of Dubai." Omitting any part of the title was grounds for dismissal on unconditional grounds.

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However, not all of the Emiratis I met in the UAE were happy with the rulers, and there were plenty who were as disappointed and disapproving as the bloggers who had risked imprisonment as a result of their open criticism.

For example, Emiratis with houses where the roofs were on the verge of collapsing told me that in order to get a house loan from the government one needed some direct-line contacts especially with the sheikhs. One man told me a neighbor in a badly dilapidated house had submitted applications for repairs but then after submitting his application he immediately approached a contact in the sheikh family who just made a single call to the housing department and the neighbor had a new house in the following month.

"I know they removed someone on the list of that month's beneficiaries and did put him there," the man who relayed to the story to me, said in an accusatory tone. "It happens here so often that even when expecting something and you are sure you should be in that list but then you find your name missing, because someone with contacts has taken your place."

Some Emiratis also were not happy with the way preliminary and runoff elections were being conducted. The rulers choose a list of eligible voters and even those to contest must be approved by the rulers in order to stand for office.

In 2006, when the country had its first-ever elections, only 6,689 people out of a population of about a million Emiratis were chosen to participate in voting and contesting—far less than 10 percent. In 2011, when the most recent elections were conducted, the number was increased to 129,274. All newspapers were expected to praise the big increase in eligible voters but when election day came only 28 percent of voters turned up to cast a vote. The papers were almost silent. Only *The National* was bold enough to mention that the voter turnout had been lower than expected. The others waited until the officials explained the reasons behind the smaller turnout and then the papers were obliged to report that "people are not yet used to election life but the process is promising." This was the style of journalism in the UAE.

Funny how some candidates who had been in the 2006 electoral colleges and even contested were missing on the list of eligible voters in 2011.

There was one female candidate who caught my attention in 2006 elections. She was a friend of my Emirati boss who had issued an order that we give her good coverage. She was the biggest spender in that election, and we ran a story indicating that she had spent about 2 million *dirhams* (US$543,478) on advertisements that year. Her elegantly styled and beautifully professional posters were everywhere in the emirate and every reporter had conducted an interview with her. However, she was not very popular on Election Day, as she managed fewer than five votes but that was not the most relevant issue. When I called her on the day of the election in 2011, after not seeing her posters anywhere in the emirate, she told me she was not even on a voters' list so that was why she could not contest. Those excluded had fallen out of the ruler's favor. There were no strict criteria for being in the electoral college or in standing for election other than sustaining the ruler's favor. In this case, she probably had offended the rulers.

Even in the FNC elections the electoral colleges could elect only one-half of the members, while the remaining portion of members was appointed by the rulers—a point not loss upon astute Emiratis who realized that the elections did not provide the modicum of genuine citizen representation in the elected body.

Chapter 61

Dubai is the UAE's most well-known emirate, to a degree more than the country's name of UAE and the capital city Abu Dhabi combined. The emirate has been touted as an ideal model of success in the turbulent Middle East. As many already know, many other governments in the region—including Abu Dhabi—always have been interested in learning how the Dubai sheikhs accomplished this. The emirate was not as fortunate with oil as Abu Dhabi but it also had used the little oil revenue it had accumulated from its meager resources to diversify its economy. Following a wisely chosen long-term perspective, Dubai leaders forecasted a day where there would be no more oil and knew once they diversified to other industries such as real estate and international finance, they would never risk poverty or being starved.

By 2005, only 17 percent of Dubai's income still came from oil. The emirate had plenty of major construction projects in progress and many more on paper to be implemented. At the time, more than 30,000 cranes—about a third of the world's available total—were being operated in the small Dubai emirate. Dubai was registering record after record: the world's largest shopping mall, the world's tallest building (Burj Dubai later renamed Burj Khalifa), the world's largest fountain, the world's tallest hotel (The Rose Hotel), the world's first seven-star hotel (Burj Al Arab). There also have been massive projects under construction like Dubailand, twice the size of the Walt Disney world resort, and then the Pentominium—the definitive height of luxury, as many referred to it—is slated to be the tallest residential building standing in the world, at 516 meters (1,700 feet approximately).

"You had to come to Dubai to know how poor we are in Uganda," Al Hajj Moses Kigongo, the vice president of the Uganda's ruling NRM party in Uganda, told me during one of his visits in Dubai. I had arranged our meeting through a common acquaintance, after learning he was in Dubai and he kindly accepted. He was right to be amazed by Dubai's shining towers, and I understood his statement in drawing comparisons with the Ugandan

tycoons we had praised for having a tower or two. The Dubai sheikhs were building cities with every imaginable element of modern infrastructure and facilities incorporated, and all of it on a first-class foundation. But the idea did not cross my head to query him on being poor even though I strongly felt the cause of our country's ever-persistent problems was poor leadership, not poverty. And, forgive me, he was part of this leadership, even while I abided the common courtesy of our meeting.

Everything has been built within the last decade or so: Dubai Media City, Dubai Internet City, Dubai Healthcare City, Dubai Studio City, Dubai Silicon City, Dubai Knowledge Village, the Down Town Burj Dubai, the Dubai marina, the business bay, and there are countless other smaller projects. There are the roads which make plain the appreciation for investing in basic infrastructure. Massive arteries of traffic spanning at least four to six wide lanes have become the norm: Sheikh Zayed Road, Emirates Road, Al Khair Road, Jumeirah Roads, among others.

These roads have flyovers and bridges that would make even the corrupt Ugandan fat cats that embezzled fortunes at that country's only northern bypass highway chuckle at their greed. The Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Crossing came in at 2.5 billion *dirhams*, the Business Bay crossing at 800 million, the floating bridge at 155 million, the Garhoud Bridge at 415 million and the Maktoum Bridge and the Dubai mile at 810 million.

This scope of extraordinary development was discussed extensively in Uganda. When I returned to my homeland for vacation, a businessman who walked in front of me as we exited the plane turned to show us the small block building that the government was undertaking to expand the airport. He remarked, "Truly if you came from Dubai Terminal 3 and you see your government building a small house at the airport that even myself I could build, you just want to cry." All of us laughed, not that we wanted the government to have something similar to Dubai's Terminal 3 because even many other world-class airports have terminals that would seem inferior to Dubai's magnificent facilities, but we also thought we could build that "small house" the government was undertaking as an expansion projects.

I have been in many Arab airports but the Dubai International Airport, in all respects, is the best. The airport has three terminals but its third is the most amazing. Constructed at a cost of $4.5 billion it is the largest facility of its kind in the world and the second largest building in the world by square footage of floor space. The terminal is used exclusively for the Emirates airlines, Dubai's flagship carrier.

And, the Al Maktoum International Airport currently still doing only cargo operations eventually will augment the capacity at Dubai International Airport once it is fully operational. The new airport, built at $33 billion, is designed to carry 160 million passengers and 14 million tons of freight a year.

Dubai's infrastructure planners didn't stop there. The Dubai Metro system, undertaken at a cost of 28 billion *dirhams* (US$7.6 billion), is a driver-less, air-conditioned operation with platform-edge doors.

And as many know, Dubai, once a small pearl fishing and trading port, has made its name in tourism, and at least every tour company in Dubai would put it on a list of its recommended destinations for its clients. Even in the hot, arid climate, Ski Dubai is one of its major tourist magnets—an indoor ski resort with temperatures just below freezing that replicate the actual experience of northern climes. The emirate, of course, invested in some of the best shopping centers in the world—from the Dubai Mall to the Emirates Mall.

An essential part of the Dubai message touts the emirate as the safest place in the world. I cannot even give a count of how many press gatherings my friend Lt. Gen. Dhahi Khlafan Tamim has held in which this claim has been reiterated. Admittedly there are far fewer burglaries and robberies, especially if one compares the statistics with Uganda's. I can't tell how many years I lived at Imad's without ever bothering to lock up our apartment at night or when we were away and it was only once that Imad's visiting relative (Abu Ali) lost his laptop. Even when I had found my house in Ajman and then Rolla keeping keys was not my thing. Whenever my wife returned from Uganda the first thing we looked for were keys, as she was into securing the doors but not me. In article after

article I wrote during my first days in *The Gulf Today* about Dubai's safety and its successful claim.

However, today I know quite a few respectable, credible individuals who would disagree with Lt. Gen. Tamim on the safety claim. To wit: Russian Sulim Yamadayev, Hamas' Mahmoud Mabhouh, and Lebanese singer Suzanne Tamim—never mind that all on the list are dead—but it's one of the reasons they would disagree with the Lieutenant General. They certainly had their personal enemies but they also bought false comfort by believing the widely marketed myth of Dubai as the world's safest place. No doubt, they would have taken extensive security measures if they were visiting or staying in Uganda but not in Dubai where they paid a price to their unfortunate surprise. After their deaths I rethought many of the articles my colleagues and I had written about the supposed exceptional climate of crime-free safety. No longer would I be willing to tout the claim without the benefit of hard evidence and even then, it would be a matter of tempering the claim with a realistic context. In some respects, I can't take blame for misleading anyone, as I was just writing what I was told. Journalists also are instinctive about their survival and while skepticism about any official claim is essential, a journalist could risk a complete disruption of life and livelihood by attempting to reconcile the claim with empirical evidence and verifiable testimony. And, the culture takes on a droning sense of comfort in its status quo. A fresh college graduate in a new country, mindful of keeping his new job as a reporter, knows that "he said and she said" is just only one way to begin a sentence, though that same reporter also would observe that all of his more experienced colleagues—even those with careers spanning many decades—essentially were writing the same thing. It was like a newspaper-style country.

This false sense of security also impacted the effectiveness of police and detectives to solve crimes, even those involving celebrities and high-profile people. Suzanne Tamim, the Lebanese singer, was found with her throat slit in her luxury apartment in Jumeirah on July 28, 2008. Her murderer managed to catch a flight to Cairo after the crime.

Less than a year later, Sulim Yamadayev, a prominent opponent of the pro-Kremlin Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, was also

shot in the underground car park of his luxury Jumeirah beach residence on March 28, 2009. He died in a hospital after two days. He had been shot three times in the back of his head and the shooter also managed to flee the country.

Then there came the murder of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, the Palestinian founder of the Hamas military wing, on January 19, 2010. Lt. Gen. Tamim released photographs of 26 suspects that had tracked Al Mabhouh from Damascus to Dubai in an assassination plot. He was drugged, electrocuted, and suffocated in his hotel room at Bustan Al Rotana in Garhoud. Not one of the 26 suspects was still in the country when Dubai police begun its investigation.

Chapter 62

Regarding these Dubai developments, one also understands how the Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed viewed the ineffectiveness of his Arab colleagues being overthrown amidst the anger of their people during the Arab Spring. He said in one press conference that he told Arab leaders long before that if they did not change their people would change them and he condemned some Arab leaders for their self-absorbed rule. It is a fair justification of condemnation for a ruler who has something positive to show to his people but who also succeeds in suppressing those who know some negative things about his country that can be blamed directly upon the leader.

I have heard some Arabs blaming the Emiratis that they would remain behind because when they were asking for freedom in other countries they were asleep. I think the accusation is not appropriate, as I believe the Emiratis tried to participate in these revolutions but the metaphorical tape on their mouths is still tighter than elsewhere in the Arab world. One merely needs to count the bloggers and tweeters who have been arrested for attempting to start a dialogue. The claim that Emiratis were sleeping or unaware is flimsy at best.

At a mosque in Khorfakhan, a suburb of Sharjah, a teacher (Hassan Al Hamadi) expressed solidarity for the Egyptian revolution. Shortly afterward, five Emiratis were arrested for advocating a dialogue between the rulers and the people. These included four Emiratis—Ahmed Mansoor, Nasser bin Ghaith, Fahad Salim Dalk, and Hassan al-Khamis—and one *bidoon* (stateless), Ahmed Abdul-Khaleq Ahmad. There were a couple of other arrests in different emirates and the Dubai police chief went on air to warn that they were monitoring all tweets and other social network communications.

Even though the country's police maintained a strict grip to avert any demonstrations similar to what were occurring elsewhere, silencing even demonstrations in solidarity of Syrian revolutionists whom the Emirates rulers openly supported, no one could say that the rising Arab Spring temperature did not reach the UAE. There was a sense of panic evident among rulers as they struggled to correct their old mistakes and improve the Emiratis' lives. The rulers

accelerated the progress on their housing projects, as the Sharjah ruler Sheikh Al Qassimi went on radio to announce that he wanted all 5,000 pending housing loans applications fulfilled in just one year instead of the previously announced five-year plan of doing 1,000 houses a year. He went further to announce an emergency housing fund of twenty million *dirhams* (US$5.4 million) to help cover rent costs for decent housing for Emiratis who were residing in dilapidated houses as they waited for their public housing loans to come through. The UAE president Sheikh Khalifa was also giving out housing and land loans mostly to neglected northern Emirates people almost every month. My colleagues in *Al Ittihad* always had to get thankful quotes that ran covering two pages in the newspaper from the local people whenever the president's office announced new loans. Most reporters spent the entire week working on just that one story.

Naturalization was also one of the major concerns of Emiratis, and the president issued a decree to give passports to children of Emirati women who were born with non-Emirati men as their fathers. However, the children had to be eighteen years old in order to enjoy their nationality and about 930 children benefited from this decree. There also was a rush to help improve the infrastructure in the primarily poor areas of the northern Emirates, as officials announced several major road projects and more hospitals along with improving on the services of existing hospitals. Perhaps most extraordinarily, certainly in the minds of Westerners, the president also offered to clear the bank debts of all Emiratis. The billionaire president tabled a total of 2 billion *dirhams* (US$544.5million), which was enough to settle the debts of 6,830 Emiratis. Those who did not have debts were envious of the unexpected lump sum payment.

Chapter 63

As I mentioned elsewhere in the book, whenever I meet a new acquaintance I get the customary first question in the UAE—"*from which country*?"—I tell them Uganda is my homeland. The next questions are always about Idi Amin. Is he dead? Did he really eat people? For many, it seems insurmountable to think of a Uganda without Idi Amin. I'm surprised that many are not even unaware of other aspects that have been widely reported about Uganda, such as the pandemic of HIV/AIDS and the presence of rebel leader Joseph Kony of the Lord's Resistance Army. Yet, few people here even knew of Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, the president who has ruled Uganda for more than thirty years.

Amin left power more than a year before I was born, so it would be delusional for me to utter opinions about his rule unless if I was to base my personal takes from films such as *The Last King of Scotland* or *Raid on Entebbe* or *Mississippi Masala* or books like *Idi Amin Dada: Hitler in Africa* or *State of Blood* or the *Ghosts of Kampala*. But many Ugandans I have at least met have a view that the dead leader was not as bad as depicted in the Western media. Such people subscribe to the notion of "history is written by victors, not the losers" and Amin did not win to write his own history. Most certainly, many Ugandans have found little difference between Amin and Museveni for whom the West seems to express total admiration.

My mother once summarized all Ugandan leaders in just few words: "They are all the same; they would do everything to fill up their stomachs." I know Mamma was not the best political analyst to turn to, but she also was not a naïve kid when Amin ruled and was a sharp mind throughout the remainder of her life which coincided with Museveni's three-decade-plus rule. When I was at home in 2006 for a vacation and I wanted to vote she called Museveni and Amin the sons of Libya's late dictator Muammar Gadhafi and then asked, "What do you expect them to do—like father, like son."

I asked her whether she meant the two leaders were supported by Gadhafi to rule Uganda—which was a fact—or that she meant Gadhafi had taught them how to cling to power, and she

just neglected to clarify her original response. She abandoned the topic by asking my niece Shadia if she had really mopped the house that day.

Uganda's history has been dominated by civil wars, the bloodiest one being the Fronasa war that deposed Idi Amin, and, of course, Museveni was involved in this conflict. The respite from war was brief, though—barely a year—and Museveni started yet another war that removed Apolo Milton Obote from office and, subsequently, Tito Okello after just a few months as president. Museveni took power for good on January 26, 1986.

The wars that brought Museveni were exceptionally bloody but, most importantly, was the unbelievably large presence of child soldiers. I remember my childhood days when we called all Museveni rebel soldiers "*kadongos*" (teenagers) and the government soldiers "*bayanya*" (bloody old). One day we took refuge in the Mengo primary school when several *kadongos* in uniform passed us, marching in strictly maintained lines, and we were told they were not harmful because they had won the battle against the *bayanyas*. I still shudder today when I notice Museveni joining others in calling for bans of using child soldiers in war. These children have been in every Ugandan civil war and Museveni's direct involvement was unmistakable.

Even after taking power, Museveni's thirst for war had not diminished. He moved on to invade and occupy Congo in a war in which about 5.4 million people died—several times more than the number of deaths during the bush war of 1980-86, which he led. In Rwanda, about 4,000 of Museveni's army formed the Rwandese Patriotic Front that culminated in the Rwandese genocide in which an estimated 800,000 people died. In neighboring Sudan he supported the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) and his army remains in Somalia, helping to keep peace there while Ugandans are shot indiscriminately on busy Kampala streets.

Uganda's neighbors despise our warring nation. At the Preston University's Ajman campus where I completed my master's degree, a Sudanese colleague questioned me persistently whether or not I believed Museveni was behind the murder of SPLA John Garanga who died in the Ugandan presidential jet after leaving

Kampala. I would always calm him, explaining that he was not the only president to have died on their way out of Uganda and I cited how the deaths of the presidents of Burundi and Rwanda signaled the 100 days of wide massacres known as the Rwandan genocide. And, if he interpreted my response to be defending Museveni, he was wrong. The truth was there was a death trap for leaders exiting Uganda especially when their relationship with our president had become strained but we didn't know who killed them. The Ugandan journalist Andrew Mwenda earned himself a few days in prison for suggesting that Museveni was responsible for the killing of Garanga, and my Sudanese friend's prison term would be longer if he was in Uganda or even me who don't know who killed Garanga would join him. The fact is these deaths are not questioned in Uganda. They always are considered accidental.

Chapter 64

One day a Ugandan broker giving me a lift asked me to call myself a Kenyan because his Congolese clients who would be riding along hated Ugandans. The clients did not ask me where I was from but inside the car I forgot my friend's advice and spoke a Lugandan word to my friend. The mood of his clients changed.

I asked them why they hated all Ugandans so much, and their reply was because they are spreading war everywhere; that the Ugandan army had committed so many brutal crimes in their country and they got away with them. Now it was my turn to apologize and clarify that the decision of invading Congo was not made with the consent of all Ugandans. It was Museveni's personal decision and even the booty his army stole from Congo did not go into the Ugandan national treasury but into their personal accounts. I also told them that Ugandans hated their leader as much as the Congolese hated him, as he had committed the same brutalities during the 1970s and 1980s when he was charting his forceful path to power. And, then, he was again brutalizing the opposition and the same horrendous crimes of killings and rapes that were occurring in the Congo happened in Uganda.

I also told them that the good name Museveni continued to enjoy in the international media mystified Ugandans. In history, no dictator had invaded other countries and remained a reformist. Look what happened to Iraq's Saddam when he invaded Kuwait and I said "agree with me" the same could be said about Museveni. At least he had already escaped any political risks with the military adventures he dumped on his people and neighbors. I told them that they should remember the days when Uganda was a regional economic power and our neighbors from the Kenyans to Congolese came to Uganda for shopping. I added that Museveni had intentionally shifted this nation's profile to a military power that made all regional leaders insecure, as a result.

At every opportunity to correct these misperceptions, I laid out a case with as much breadth and depth of perspective as possible. I explained that Ugandans have never been satisfied or happy to see this shift in the country. Jobless Ugandans protested by leaving

the country and I reminded my fellow passengers that their driver was a college-educated fellow countryman of mine. At the end of our excursion, the two Congolese men were content and my friend was happy that I had managed to explain myself so clearly and extensively. He no longer feared losing his customers.

After a few months he told me his relationship with his clients had actually become stronger, as if he was now being treated as a continental brother. They would even trust to send him money while in Congo to purchase on their behalf spare parts for their businesses and whenever they came, they always asked about me.

In Uganda, there was plenty of evidence that showed just how intricately we were linked to our neighboring citizens in suffering through our government's seemingly unquenchable thirst for war and violence. On Bombo Road that leads to my old school—Lugo Primary in Luwero—is where the scars of the real Museveni 1980-86 war can be found. During the battles, Museveni's soldiers used the district's bushes to mount an onslaught on forces loyal to the Apolo Milton Obote government, and, today, the district is full of skulls from the war victims. The residents had piled most of the skulls on the road for all passers-by to see. They were collected from bushes, gardens, abandoned homes, and other locations.

One day at Lugo, as we had gone for cultivation work in Kojjo where the school had a large farm, several children uncovered a skull in the garden. They cried for everyone to see their discovery but I was so nervous to approach the site. At the age of eight I could not stand any trace or evidence of death. I had even always kept my head down in a car as we drove to the school to avoid seeing the skulls the residents paraded on the road. My mother one time tried to show me the skulls but when she noticed my fear, she reminded me to look down whenever the car approached these large piles of skulls. Even this skull in our school garden could not attract my attention, despite the pleas by Waswa, a school chum of mine. When Waswa returned he asked why I thought that only the skulls were found, and didn't those people in the war have other body parts. I don't remember the answer I gave but I am certain today—as an adult—I don't

know. The brutalities were so inhumanely fierce that one dared to imagine to what extremes soldiers went to desecrate the bodies of battle victims.

In the early nineties the government began commissioning mass graves to bury the remains of the Luwero victims. About 70,000 skulls were laid to rest in these graves but the war also was said to have claimed more than 300,000 lives. Even in these new mass graves the government was not finished with using these skulls as scarecrows to remind the masses. These skulls would be perched at visible spots—on window ledges, perhaps—almost as if one was trying to copy the Halloween customs that entertain and delight so many Americans. And, today, I remain at a loss in trying to explain why African leaders cannot let the dead—on whose blood they came to power—rest in peace. Why their human remains are always used as play pieces in a political game to remind the opposition about the risks of challenging the ruling leadership or, more recently, used as an exotic, bizarre attraction to earn some cheap tourist money is perplexing. There have been many dead in Afghanistan, thousands have died in America's war in Iraq and there are conflicts everywhere, but only in Africa nations cannot bury their war dead and forget them.

I have been to Rwanda and all recommendations from tour operators encourage tourists to visit these mass killing sites. Call it crudely "genocide tourism." In the genocide museum, bodies have been piled up and buried for display. One still can smell the stench and see their clothes they wore on that fateful day piled in a common clump. And, I continue to disagree strenuously with anyone who buys these cheap justifications suggesting that these sites should be maintained to document the past, even as stark and disturbing as it is. To me, this is just a political weapon of naked opportunism, an exploitation of the dead to throw up hurdles and barriers against any political change that would suggest progressivism and enlightenment. It is really just a tool for bloodthirsty leaders to stay in power.

There is another mass grave in Uganda that the government of Museveni wants people to forget. There is a mass grave at Kanugu in western Uganda where the cult leader Joseph Kibwetere is said

to have murdered more than 500 members of his group in 1999 and 2000. The cult had other mass graves in which members were buried, and one of these graves had 150 bodies. In 2011, reporters documented that the house in which the 150 bodies had been found was being renovated as a commercial guesthouse. Now one can easily draw the parallels between the mass graves in Luwero that the government want to keep in people's memory and others they want people to forget—especially those in which their cause does not serve their cruel political objectives.

Chapter 65

I was in an African restaurant at the Pacific hotel for a late afternoon lunch when the news of Gadhafi's capture came on television. There were no confirmations or photos but the BBC was running the headlines as if there was no uncertainty about the news. I noticed that the Ugandan restaurant patrons were sad. The Muslims had shown their solidarity for Gadhafi. There was a deep affinity. Uganda's largest mosque was even bigger than any in Libya, courtesy of Gadhafi's generosity. Amy, who was the restaurant's hostess, was sad because Gadhafi built a palace for her people's kingdom in Toro. In fact, the Toro queen mother was close to Gadhafi, one of the dictator's most loyal friends to the end and she lobbied African leaders to help out Gadhafi during the NATO air strikes. The Ugandan leading tabloid had a year before run a series of unconfirmed yet potentially scandalous stories about the Queen mother's love affair with Gadhafi. The kingdom responded by asking for an apology from the paper and the Libyan embassy in Uganda followed accordingly, suing the newspaper for libel and defamation.

The images of the dead Gadhafi started appearing on the TV screen in the restaurant and the mood was reverently somber. I tried to cheer up some by reminding them that, after all, Gadhafi also killed ruthlessly. The response was hardly encouraging. Several accused me of being a heartless admirer of colonialism.

I was not sure myself about whether to be sorry for Gadhafi's fate. When I saw the images of his son Muatasim, who was killed after reaching home as well as unconfirmed news reports of Saif Al Islam's likely demise, I was thinking that this retribution now had become unconscionably excessive. The following day—a Friday, which also was my birthday—I switched on the news to learn that Saif was still on the run, while other reports indicated he had been detained after trying to flee through Niger. Those reports turned out to be false. However, not all Ugandans were sorry about Gadhafi, as some Christians could never forgive the fallen dictator for blaspheming the Bible during one of his visits to Uganda.

The mood in my Sharjah office among most of my Emirati and Egyptian colleagues could best be described as deeply resentful. Amna Al Nuiami, the most religious of all staff, declared Gadhafi's death as the justified killing of an oppressor and one of the best Jihads of today. Ahmed Morsy wanted him dead but he also never wanted his body to be desecrated as the widely circulating videos had shown. "We are Muslims and Gadhafi is one of us; please, that is not the way we treat dead bodies in Islam," he said. Tahreer Al Amiri, the only Palestine colleague, appreciated Gadhafi's role in the Palestinian cause but he also said that for his repressive rule and the killing of his own people he deserved death as well.

I added that a funeral prayer had been held in Uganda's biggest mosque, a mosque that Gadhafi had built for us and that the mood in most of Africa was mourning, not celebration.

Ahmed added his voice, explaining how Gadhafi had been clearly generous with some poor African countries but yet mean and unsympathetic to his own people. In response, Amna immediately declared the money that went to all those African countries as *haram* (illegal) and not their *haq* (right). Arabs could share the same view but not Africans.

As the NATO campaign began to topple Gadhafi, Yoweri Museveni, Uganda's president, authored an op-ed in Uganda's *Daily Monitor* newspaper discussing how what was happening to Gadhafi could not occur in any other African country, Uganda included. The piece perpetuated a common myth all dictators believe that prevent them from learning from the fall of their counterparts. The president went ahead to preach to Libya's revolutionaries to avoid becoming puppets of colonialism while arguing that Gadhafi was not all bad as he personally had seen all the fine roads that the Libyan leader had built and were now being used to carry out the revolutionaries' effective campaign. I would understand from this statement that Museveni knew some African leaders who never even bothered to build roads, as a short drive anywhere in Uganda's capital city of Kampala would suffice to demonstrate.

Museveni's first reaction on hearing about his long-enduring ally's death also referred back to the revelation of the deposed dictator's attempt to assassinate him which occurred several years

previously while he was addressing an NRM retreat at the Kyankwanzi National Leadership Institute (NALI). This item had been reported in the Uganda's *Weekly Observer* on October 27, 2011.

Museveni reported Gadhafi to Jendayi Frazier, the former U.S. assistant secretary of state for African affairs, on June 13, 2008, the paper reported. I could not stop laughing over this statement. Nonetheless I realized how serious it was, as our dictators also had somewhere to report like the school prefects reported fellow prefects to the head boy in school.

Museveni also attributed Gadhafi's defeat to his failure to purchase a sophisticated surface-to-air missile worth $4 billion. "The same company from which we purchased our jet fighters wanted to sell Gaddafi these missiles and he hesitated, yet his regime had over $200 billion in foreign accounts," Museveni was quoted as saying, in the newspaper's report.

Now, I had wished that my Libyan friends could hear or read this to understand why Ugandans were mourning their fallen dictator. If the two countries were to exchange their leaders, Libyans would have to fight a longer war with Museveni than they did with Gadhafi who was reluctant to spend their money by purchasing missiles.

Chapter 66

During the middle of one day as I sat at my computer writing my copy for the day, I was struck by an email from Godfrey Wampona, a Ugandan engineer in Ajman. The email recounted a debate about a corruption scandal surrounding Uganda's oil and gas resources that had made its way in the pages of *The Daily Monitor*. Meanwhile, I was following the newspaper's online coverage of the ongoing Ugandan parliamentary sessions. The Hon. Gerald Karuhaga, the youth MP, who was a year behind me at Makerere and who took over as guild president when I left for Dubai, was part of these headlines. He had brought evidence implicating the nation's ministers in highly questionable oil deals. It's worth reproducing a few lines of the parliamentary debate as they appeared online that day:

6:29 p.m.:- Gerald Karuhanga takes to the floor.

6:31 p.m.:- Karuhanga says the Hon. Kutesa Kahamba Sam through his company East African Development company Kenya received 17m Euros [close to Ushs.74bn) through his bank called EFK in Zurich. The money was leaving a Tullow account 40037242019 in a bank in Malta . . . through a recipient bank in UAE Dubai.

6:37 p.m.:- Kutesa stands up to defend himself.

6:39 p.m.:- Kutesa stands on point of order saying: "Karuhanga has alleged that I received through my company called East Africa Development and that the money went into an account that belongs to me in Zurich. Is it in order to use this House and the privileges it attaches to members to tell falsehoods and utter defamatory statements which are false well knowing that he can't repeat them outside this chamber?"

6:41 p.m.:- Kutesa continues: "And Madam Speaker—is he also in order to rely on forged documents that have been making rounds in this city and some of which I have myself. The documents have been circulating in town. Am seeking your ruling on the matter because he, Karuhanga, hasn't substantiated.

6:46 p.m.:- Karuhanga asks that Kutesa tables the documents he says he has which are "forged & moving around the city" that he took oil kickbacks.

• Karuhanga says on June 21, from Tullow on account 4003724191 from the same back to Dubai the Hon. Hillary Onek (shows bank statements) received 500,000 Euros.

• *July 6, Hillary Onek received another 500,000 Euros on his account 0034450627007 in a Dubai bank.*

Hillary Onek also received another 500,000 Euros on July 17, 2010 same bank same account.

Kadaga makes ruling: Of course those are serious matters and I now ask that Karuhanga substantiates.

Karuhanga also said August 10, 2010 received 3m Euros on the same account.

• *Karuhanga said on the same day, Hillary Onek received 1.5m Euros on the same account same day.*

After reading through this exchange, I connected to Godfrey via Skype and told him that this man was really plundering our poor country. Godfrey responded, "Man we all along thought Gadhafi was stealing millions of dollars yet our own leaders were also embezzling 17 million Euros."

But how does Dubai connect to this? This was a question for which we both had no answers. How could decent and morally upright sheikhs—at least in the widely communicated public image—allow oil companies and corrupt African government officials to transfer their larceny through the Emirati banks. Has Dubai's financial hub continued to transform itself into the next Switzerland for African corrupt leaders?

The corruption story would fill most of the Ugandan media for the remainder of the year, and gradually the blame—as usual—was shifting from the bribe takers to the bribe givers. Of course, in my perception, all parties were corrupt. Tullow, the British MNC, was among the bidders for the Ugandan oil contracts, and it won the bid but now WikiLeaks showed how it succeeded and the MP had picked up these documents. was said to have offered the bribe to our ministers. But the media alone were not enough to investigate these corruption scandals to any satisfactory level of detail, and the ruling elite—not surprisingly, most of them being family sympathizers of the bribe takers—were unwilling to help. Then would the UK police be willing to investigate their own companies for giving bribes in Africa? And, would we ever know how many British companies were paying bribes to win contracts in Africa?

The other concern was how Uganda inevitably would be haunted by Africa's oil curse. It was because of oil that the likes of Museveni were strongly opposed to relinquishing power. Already all the deals of oil had been done with absolute secrecy worthy of an expert thief.

Amama Mbabazi, the prime minister, and Sam Kuteesa, foreign minister, have always been cited as the major players in this corruptive game but because of their family ties with Museveni they could always find immunity. Kuteesa is an in-law to Museveni, a cousin to Museveni's wife Janet. In their family politics which encourages members to marry within so as not to spread money to foreigners, Kuteesa arranged for his daughter to marry Museveni's eldest son, Muhoozi Kainerugamba.

In March of 2009, Uganda's Independent magazine named more than thirty members of Museveni's family who served in key government posts, echoing the nepotistic practices of the Nahyan and Maktoum ruling families in the UAE. But here is the difference: most of the Ugandan Museveni family royals have been cited in corruption and embezzlement scandals, not the case with the Nahyans and Maktoums.

Kuteesa was the main name in a corruption scandal that involved the procurement and hire of BMW vehicles at a cost of 9.4 billion Ugandan shillings for use during the Commonwealth heads of state and government meeting in Kampala, back in 2007. Mbabazi had also been involved in the land corruption scandal in which he sold his 411 acres of land at Temangalo to the Uganda National Social Security Fund (NSSF) at a whopping price of 11.2 Ugandan billion, instead of 70 million—the land's real value. He had also defrauded the fund by claiming that the land comprised 564 acres and even the actual size of 411 acres included a large area of swamp that was hardly useful for meaningful development.

Not surprisingly, the Museveni-dominated parliament declared Mbabazi innocent to the dismay of Ugandans, a move prompting the opposition to walk out of parliament in protest. In another twist, the less connected NSSF managing director (David Chandi) and his deputy (Mondo Kagonyera) were sacked

for mismanaging workers' funds, according to the *Weekly Observer* newspaper reports.

Unfortunately, in this age, I assume that few readers anymore are surprised to learn just how rich these people are and to draw comparisons with the entrenched poverty in the country. Ugandans know all too well the failing infrastructure of roads, hospitals and schools while still incapable of understanding just how and why Museveni enjoys a good name in the Western press, especially when the evidence is plainly in sight.

At least, the revelations of the oil dirty deals by my friend and the youthful MP were like a tsunami. Kuteesa agreed to step down as minister of foreign affairs while Museveni hurried to defend his right-hand man Mbabazi.

"People who are pushing Mbabazi to step down basing on WikiLeaks are not after Mbabazi but after Museveni. They want to use WikiLeaks to remove me. Mbabazi is going nowhere and Museveni is going nowhere," the quotes read as they appeared in Uganda's *Weekly Observer*.

Kuteesa and Mbabazi are Uganda's own version of Zardari and, at time of press, Asif Ali Zardari is Pakistan's current president. Calling anyone "Mr. 10 percent" would be an underestimation by far. But, I am confident that very soon the veil on their faces finally will be lifted and the entire world no longer will abide by the capacity of men like these to engage in the dirtiest of details that keep them in reckless power. The ghosts of those who died because they had embezzled all funds for drugs that would have saved them will forever haunt them.

The call for a change of power in Uganda is desperate. But with election after election being rigged, demonstrations crushed and political opponents silenced with arrests and torture, the probabilities seem to shrink, especially as those who seek to squash any semblance of democratic progress are portrayed as brave statesmen and reformers in the Western media. The masses everywhere are learning that real change often does not come through their hands alone. And, there is the bitter recognition that corridors of power distribution are found only in the enlightened and democratic Diasporas of the North American and European continents. Historians would call

them imperialists but doubt that even the old colonialists would dare keep leaders so hated by their own people in power. This is not to utter support of colonialism but one must acknowledge that some leaders cannot even be compared logically here.

Imagine if the funds that built the Ugandan railway had come to the nation during Museveni's time, how that railway would look like today or if it would have ever been built. However there is still a glimmer of hope among Ugandans that change will come, despite Museveni's three decades of economic and politically decadent rule.

Indeed, we have seen plenty of recent reminders that those who sit in the corridors of power do not have permanent friends; that their minds keep on changing especially when it comes to aging puppet figures. They have done it to Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Colonel Muammar Gadhafi, Museveni's dear friend. And once their mind is made up, they will call Museveni and say:

"Thank you very much our man for the role you played not only in Uganda but the whole of the East African region. Now as you can see yourself, your age and your people are against you. To be frank, you are not irreplaceable. We need another group which is as fresh and popular as when we first saw you in the Eighties."

Museveni would try to name his heir, perhaps his son Muhoozi or Mbabazi, his prime minister, as they are obedient and have been respectively trained. He can also cite threats of Al Qaeda, as his Gadhafi friend did, but these maneuvers can only work if the power distributors do not have a candidate themselves. If the leader of the opposition did not approach them to assure them that their interests would be a priority and sacrosanct, trust me, this is what all African presidents and Arab rulers do.

So Museveni would have a choice to go peacefully or by force. The second alternative also has a process. It starts with a media campaign called dehumanization that replaces the "reformist" label with the "dictator" label. That is when our venerable leader would be reminded that he has blood on his hands and when so many fellow nations would publicly express dismay as to how someone could have absorbed so much blood on his hands continuously without even taking a single shower for decades. Uganda's

civil wars victims, at minimum, must be counted in six figures and the blame of who killed them would be apportioned in significant sizes without any compelling rationalization or excuse. Museveni's war tactics would be labeled as war crimes in the clearest sense: the use of children as soldiers and the indiscriminate hijacking of planes as represented in the incident at Kasese in November of 1985. Museveni hijacked a plane during his bush war to come to power that year, and he always has used child war soldiers. The documented chronicles of torture in the Uganda's safe houses would emerge for the first time. Alarms of war would be activated and the allied powers finally will speak with the same voice of good conscience. By this stage even those he had called friends in the corridors of power would have forgotten him completely.

This happened to Gadhafi. He had close friends in Europe's palaces but they also were the ones that led a campaign to depose him. The Iraq War experience had taught them that once Uncle Sam says a friend turns an enemy and must be removed they have to participate in the campaign or they would miss out on the lucrative oil deals after the war.

Then there was this new Kony 2012 video gaining prominence all over the world.

Kony had been terrorizing Ugandans in the 1980s and 1990s and the international community did not care. Almost completely forgotten, Kony emerged in the American consciousness, as the United States sent 100 military personnel into the country to track him down in 2011. Then the Kony 2012 video campaign came and celebrities including Oprah Winfrey and Rihanna prominently endorsed it. In Uganda, people were not naive for explaining a relationship between this video campaign and the military deployment and later, the report that Uganda's oil reserves would push the nation into the list of the world's top fifty oil producers.

I had several chats with Ugandans in Dubai and everyone had the same message in mind. The United States was spreading this propaganda to increase the popularity of the war and justify its further intervention with more military in Uganda. That would mean support to the Museveni dictatorship in the same way the world's superpower has supported dictators in the oil

rich Arab countries. All opposition to the three-decade iron-fist rule of Museveni would then be branded terrorism or linked to Kony. But one American staff photographer once disputed this assertion when I did put it across him while we were driving in his car to an assignment in Sharjah. He told me that the United States did not need any justification to enter Uganda—it could do it at will. That was pretty much brazen cowboyship but I didn't tell him so. Instead, I asked if he never thought that the U.S. administration still needed justifications to convince the U.S. Senate and masses in America that an intervention in Uganda costing billions of their taxpayers' monies was justifiable and he just nodded his head.

Chapter 67

Following six years of rapid growth, the Dubai's dream economy slumped in 2009. Dubai, the corporate face of the emirate to the world that built palm-shaped islands and managed the globe's largest ports and industrial zones amassed a $59 billion debt.

It was on the eve of Eid Al Adha in 2009 when Dubai revealed its financial problems. Nakheel, a Dubai World subsidiary had a bond of $3.5 billion due to be paid in the month as the holiday but it could not satisfy the arrears. The emirate requested that Dubai World be allowed to delay its debt payments for six months, and the news shocked the financial world. Everyone had believed Dubai's development was occurring far too fast to be sustained realistically but no one also believed it would come close to defaulting on debt payments. After the announcement, as journalists, we could do little to talk to our government sources because of the Eid holiday. However, the panic was everywhere among expatriates, residents, and local Emiratis.

It was after the Eid holidays that the Abu Dhabi government announced that it would bail out the emirate with $10 billion to repay its debts. The terms of this bailout were not revealed but the news was a surprise but we all thought it had come quite late. Why would they leave their brother to go first on his knees disclosing his financial frailties and then move to rescue them? It was not news that the financial woes of the emirate had been known for quite some months but all the UAE government had done was to distance itself away from the troubled Dubai companies, saying they alone were responsible for their actions. However the rescue managed to ease the tension and help Dubai pay off its immediate debts but still there was more at stake.

The Dubai World debt of $59 billion was just three quarters of the Emirates' official debt of $80 billion total and some analysts were putting the figure at double of what was being termed as the official amount.

There were more bailouts to come.

In March of 2010, the Dubai government announced it would bail out the Dubai World with $9.5 billion. Dubai World

also presented its plan to restructure $23.5 billion of debt to its creditors, and it also planned to convert $8.9 billion of government debt into equity.

The scars of the Dubai debt crunch were evident everywhere. Several major construction projects were cancelled. Among the three Palm projects that Nakheel had undertaken, only the Palm Jumeirah—a tree trunk with sixteen fronds—had been completed and tenants had entered.

Palm Jebel Ali, the second development about 50 percent larger than Palm Jumeirah, was on hold. The project was expected to house more than 250,000 people, and included six marinas, a water theme park, and a sea village where homes would be built on stilts above the water and boardwalks linking the structures.

The Palm Deira intended to house one million people—that was to be eight times larger than the Palm Jumeirah and five times larger than Palm Jeberi Ali—was also put on hold.

The Dubai waterfront planned to be the world's largest manmade development was also put on hold. The project was a conglomeration of canals and artificial archipelagos with zones of mixed use including commercial, residential, resort, and amenity areas. Nakheel also advertised thirteen unused construction cranes intended for use in the Waterfront project for sale.

There was also this underwater hotel planned—the Hydropolis Underwater Hotel and Resort at a whopping cost of $300 million that would have been the first of its kind in the world. That was the one project I personally felt sorry would not proceed.

As expected, the list of cancelled projects was not anywhere available to any media but the scale of abandoned projects was too extensive to be shuffled into the background. Residents easily could spot abandoned work sites and cranes not operating.

Thousands of people were also losing jobs and in a country where one's visa is attached to one's job, and that meant many people had no other option but to leave the emirate.

In 2009 and 2010, the news was a bit frightening. Damac Holding, one of Dubai's big property developers, announced that it would cut 200 jobs due to the worsening financial crisis.

Emaar, another property developer in the emirate, announced it was reviewing its 5,000 workforce as the property market weakened in the emirate. The Dubai police commander-in-chief warned companies against laying off Emirati nationals and justifying these firings with excuses of financial hardship. Many laborers were flooding the labor ministry with complaints of not being paid for several months by their private employers, while other employers just disappeared without notifying employees. It was real luck to be still working, and one that I always remembered to thank God and also obey TLE, my tough yet fair editorial boss.

Shopping centers were close to empty and nightclubs also had handfuls of people on what previously had been jam-packed nights of revelers.

A number of Emiratis I could talk to during those days expressed their support for their ruler and shared his pains. One Emirati in the *Al Ittihad* office where I worked announced one day that all those who spread rumors about Sheikh Mohammed and his Dubai debts were traitors.

"Look at all those Western media people who were praising Sheikh Mohammed before and eating from his endeavors are now the same people abusing him because they think there is no more to eat in Dubai," he said.

There was a story in the *Daily Mail* that caught my attention with the headline "Will Abu Dhabi Impose Conditions for Dubai Bailout." The writer related a gesture at the opening of the Dubai Air Show in which the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan placed his hand over the Dubai ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, to signal that Abu Dhabi would take care of Dubai, in case of need.

Not only Emiratis were taking the criticisms in a deeply personal way, even their ruler Sheikh Mohammed had told the Western media essentially to "shut up."

Personally, I did not think that Dubai had ended, as we had known it. The emirate still enjoyed the best infrastructure compared to its rivals in the region and could remain a first choice to any investor who has traveled in the region.

Chapter 68

Economic uncertainties, never previously entertained in Dubai, rattled me personally as well, wondering what if things continued to deteriorate and I, too, would have to leave the country. At this point, I had been in Dubai for almost three years and in Uganda, I never could contemplate the probabilities of owning my home or, much less, a business upon which I could support my family. Returning to Uganda would not be a worthy option should things continue to be problematic in the Emirates. Of course, I also was frugal, mindful not to be tempted by the extravagances which abounded in Dubai, yet things were not tying up with any budgetary sense. Salaries were small given the cost of living in Dubai and all of it was spent on responsibilities that continued to pile up and it was often spent within a few days. However, I also had managed to build for my mother a house but that was not an asset upon which I could rely. I had bought the five-acre land in Masulita with the hope of eventually building a school there but I had yet to receive title to the land. I was at a loss and worried that I would soon be a laughing stock, a failure whom had once got a life chance by going to Dubai but even then failed to transform his life.

I contemplated taking a loan from a bank to buy land near the capital city and build some apartment houses where my family could stay and rent out the remaining few houses to tenants as another source of family income. To get a loan I had to first clear the arrears on a credit card from an Islamic bank that I had taken to pay for the land in Masulita. I didn't have money for clearing the account balance so I exchanged the Islamic credit card with a secular bank card that gave me a loan.

My credit card was on a 22,000-*dirham* loan at the end of the month but the bank withdrew 1,245 *dirhams* and my outstanding loan now stood at 22,400 *dirhams*. I could not believe it. I went to the bank to complain and the representative who went through my account said there was nothing wrong. I pointed out that more than 1,200 *dirhams* were withdrawn but they had now added 400 *dirhams* to the loan balance. He replied that was the credit card policy to which I had signed the agreement. About 800 *dirhams* went toward the loan servicing for interest and insurance. I still could

not understand it, so I asked him if he realized that by the end of the credit card loan term, I would have paid out three times what I had withdrawn. He didn't seem to comprehend my concerns so I tried to be as precise as possible, explaining that I would be paying 75,000 *dirhams* for 25,000 *dirhams* of credit.

"You know most of our clients don't always look at it that way," he explained. "If you ever look at it that way you will never have a credit card or even take a loan because these are the rules, and there are monthly charges. The problem was you had overdrawn your credit card, so put some money back and you will pay less every month."

I still missed his point, for the simple reason that I had not even reached my credit card limit of 25,000 *dirhams* so I could not understand the issue about being overdrawn. Resigned, I left the bank and started thinking about closing out the credit card account. I frowned upon all financiers, as, like many, I had learned how they largely profit from people's troubles. I compared the new credit card with what I had with an Islamic bank. True, I heard critics from Muslim circles claiming that all credit cards were the same whether from the so-called Islamic or secular banks. The Islamic banks just changed the vocabulary indicating interest payments with some Islamic terminology to fool clients that such practices were acceptable in Islam, but here I had found a difference. The Islamic credit card required a service fee of only 150 *dirhams* a month whether I had used it or not or no matter how much I had drawn. The remaining money was to go straight on one's credit account. For example, if my standing credit on the card was 20,000 *dirhams* and at the month's end they deducted 1,000 *dirhams* from my account, my standing credit would now be 19,150 *dirhams* and the bank would just take 150 *dirhams* for its services. There had been a mix-up.

But to close the credit card when I was still in the process of constructing my rental apartments could not easily be met with my salary. I thought about taking more loans, close the credit card, and finish my house. When I asked the bank about the prospect of another loan, I was told that I would have to complete a full year before being eligible for the loan. This was in February so I had to wait until July in paying the loan and credit card.

My new life had begun—one of always being broke, choking on loans, of which about 30 percent of my salary was now going to a loan every month. I falsely assumed that when I took the second loan that very soon my salary would be increased, but for the next four to five years it remained the same. Even the house apartments I had built were of little impact, as tenants paid their rent in incremental bits and each apartment was rented at a monthly rate less than $100.

Only a few people realized the nightmare I endured. Many who saw my house and that one I had built for Mamma while I still worked in Dubai's City 7 TV network were envious, believing that I had arrived into my own financially. I was getting calls for friends' wedding contributions, when friends found themselves in financial straits, when a relative was admitted to hospital and when a relative son or daughter failed to pay school fees. And, some cousins wanted capital to start a business.

No one could consider my situation that I still was getting the same salary I had from four years previous when I had no family and stayed in shared accommodations. The same salary that used to do a dozen things could hardly go halfway yet it remained the same for four years. Daddy had retired from his work and needed a monthly contribution from me to keep going, Mummy was still working but her family had also expanded from relatives' orphans and she always needed a contribution from me.

Chapter 69

It had been five years since my sister Mayi and her friend Aida moved to Kiboga, a district in central Uganda, and ask for the hand of Sauda on my behalf. Regarding Islam, Mayi was solidly authoritative in our family and when she said that two women could negotiate with Hajji Ali Mawejje, Sauda's father, and give the dowry in my absence no one argued. She had married a strict Muslim whose ideas all family members thought were ridiculous and I, too, disagreed with most of them but not this one of bringing Sauda. Like most Muslims, I have never disagreed with teachings favoring us.

Sauda, a beautiful and humble girl, joined me in Dubai to start a family. She was a good listener, and I always did the talking and she approved. I learned that in her world I was always seen as right and thanked Mayi accordingly. We had no debates at home until five years later.

We had two children—Latifa and Taqiudin—and she thought that I should do a formal wedding for her. This was preposterous that even her family were asking her what kind of Dubai man I was who could not afford a wedding? I knew this was Dubai now putting me at a disadvantage in this debate. I had had my reservations for a wedding on purely financial grounds, as despite my being in Dubai I was actually not doing well financially. She said she had seen people doing worse than me at least, and wanted me to do an introduction (*kwanjula*) and advised I fundraise like others or take a loan. It was clear she wanted this elaborate celebration and she was doing her best to convert me gradually toward her position. I calculated extensively before reaching any decision and deciding to what extent of a celebration I could realistically manage.

Ali Mazrui, an African scholar, had described Africans as being "triple heritage," in that for a wedding they had the formal traditional stage of an introduction or *Kwanjula* in my culture, then the religious one called *Nikkah* in Islam, where in church they must also have a name, and, finally, the last—the Western part they call reception or wedding. I considered the *Nikkah* already accomplished by the family's senior Islamist Mayi and

what I needed now was just *Kwanjula*. Sauda agreed that if I did this, she would pardon me from the responsibilities of organizing a wedding. There was yet another calculation in waiting and this was the most important one: money. It was not that cool or appropriate in terms of etiquette for a man working in Dubai to be seen fundraising so I had to ensure I could foot the bill or, at least, most of it. I took a loan from the office to be repaid in four months, as Sauda had advised.

All functions have their own tensions even despite going home when I almost had all the money I needed according to my budget. I was here and there stuck with preparations. I was in Uganda just a week before the function, so I chose Kiseka Mudashiru, a former school friend, to be the chairman of the organizing committee. In *Kwanjula*, the party is held at the woman's home, and the groom brings gifts to the family as an appreciation for the ceremony. This was quite a relief, as I had to do just a few contributions on the party's preparations but the main part of the burden was all on Sauda's family. My task was gifts, gifts and gifts, which essentially measured the manhood in the husband taking his wife. We had done most of the shopping with Sauda in Dubai, and Kisekka did all the shopping of what was required in Kampala.

The day of the *kwanjula* started with some uncertainties. It had rained the whole night and a lorry that came to collect the gifts from my home failed on a slippery road and crashed into a small house in the neighborhood. Kisekka talked to the neighbors to allow us to do the repair when we returned. Kisekka also confiscated my phone when he noticed my stress by the stream of last-minute callers. He insisted I had to be free and show no stress at the function.

Finally, our convoy set off from the Wandegeya mosque, for a journey of about 120 kilometers to Kiboga where Sauda's parents lived. About two kilometers from the district town was a posh home of the Muyenga standards not rivaled in the neighborhood or even the whole district. Al Hajj Mawejje was a prosperous businessman, one of the richest in Kiboga. He had arranged a colorful function that neither me nor anyone among my convoy dreamed of planning. All the district dignitaries were

present, from the former cabinet minister of security and minister of fisheries (Ruth Nankabirwa) to district leaders such as the chairman and the Kadhis. A trio of musicians was among the entertainers, including Al Hajj Harouna Mubiru. This singer turned Hajj was among the popular musicians in the country, but the Muslims also loved him because they thought he was genuinely pious and few Muslims dared criticize his music career. He had abandoned his old singing group of the Eagles just days after his return from Mecca pilgrimage, for not wanting to perform in clubs where alcohol was sold.

And then there was Sheikh Buyodo, my best preacher who uses comedy to inflect his messages. He had mastered Islam's marriage bedroom teachings as Sheikh Hood had mastered teachings on life after death. I had not noticed that he was seated in the front row but as soon as he stood and took the microphone my heartbeat accelerated. I was seated to the opposite of my father-in-law, looking straight at Al Hajj Mawejje. If Sheikh Buyondo had looked into my face he would have read the panic suggesting, "Please spare us some details of what Islam teaches married people to do. It is going to be inconvenient for my father-in-law in front of me, but he didn't look to read it."

He started with teachings of why Islam allowed polygamy, advising that the best practices were to mix tribes and races of women. I realized he was sounding more inconveniencing to Sauda not that I had feared the same for her father and me. My wife, like all Muslim women, has difficulties accepting the teachings of polygamy. He then launched into matters of bedroom hygiene, remarks which earned him applause from the audience, mostly those Kampala guys in my convoy, for a number of them knew him quite well.

After the function I thought Sauda had been right. For all my life I had plenty of victories that deserved celebrations but I had never done one. I had excelled in school exams and even the students who scored lower did parties but I never had one. I had completed two university degrees and still I had not done a single graduation party. Not so much that I hated parties but there were times when I could not afford one. Now this party for Sauda was

the first one I had ever done and it was immensely satisfying. And, I have watched the DVD of that celebration and I am always happy to share it with guests at my home.

I should add that not all that I see on the DVD pleases me, I find my talking wherever a chance came out like a complete failure. Actually I always have been nervous with a microphone. I tried to fight this nervousness and there is where I got it wrong, as I appeared more nervous and still now I don't want to watch myself speak in public. If I had a chance to delete it on all the DVDs I would have done it before the copies were distributed.

Unfortunately, my mother missed out on the biggest party of my life. She was not sick, and, in fact, she came to bid us farewell at Wandegenya. The reason was that the local culture does not allow a mother to escort her son to the in-laws. Mayi also missed, a sister who cared deeply and brought Sauda's hand to me. For her she was heavy and expecting her sixth baby within days.

All in all, the event gave the villagers of Kiboga something to talk about for the whole year. For me, it has become one of my most important memories.

EPILOGUE

Chapter 70

In May 2012 I took two weeks' emergency leave in Uganda, after reports that my mother was turning down cancer tests even while physicians believed she had the disease. She had been experiencing hoarseness and vigorous dry hacking cough since January. Earlier medical tests indicated she had a multi-pronged nodule but there was no swelling. I had been following up news about her diagnosis and treatments from my siblings, but the disease worsened and occasionally she could not even eat or talk. My young brother Wahab, who was then completing his course in radiography at Mulago Paramedical School, took Mamma for tests at the hospital and they ruled out cancer. However, doctors at the Nsambya hospital, where she was admitted a week later, dismissed the results and said cancer was very likely. They did some tests and CT scans to confirm the diagnosis. Oncologists recommended a biopsy to pinpoint the disease's origin but my mother refused, worried that she had seen so many other relatives and old friends die soon after their biopsies. Many of her elderly relatives, in fact, advised her not to go ahead with the biopsy.

I decided to go to Uganda and urge her to proceed so that treatments could be started immediately. My grandmother Museebeyi had come to stay with her only remaining daughter and she had just one message: don't allow them to cut any single bit of flesh from the body. Relative after relative—especially the elderly—cautioned me against encouraging Mamma to go ahead with the biopsy. When we met a cardiologist at the Nsambya Hospital, he said there was no way treatment could proceed without the biopsy but we also needed all the children to be around and agree on the procedure. He said that my mother was having breathing problems because one of the tubes in her left lungs was already blocked, which would require a surgical intervention. He referred us to a pulmonary doctor in Kamwokya who operated a "breathe easy clinic" to see what he could do to ameliorate her symptoms but the physician said after reviewing her case history and examining her agreed with the others who recommended the biopsy. He believed it was cancer, so we thought that if Mamma was stubborn about having cold feet for the biopsy

then perhaps we could convince the oncologists at Nsambya to start her treatments.

I was confused. I truly wanted to help my mother, and do the right thing for her but I also believed avoiding the biopsy was not prudent. We four siblings agreed that the biopsy should go forward (We did not consult Sumaya, my autistic sister, because it was well beyond her capacity to comprehend what was happening). Yet despite the consensus among the siblings, we knew this was not a democratic process. My mother and her mother Museebeyi had veto power. Likewise, Wahab's father (Hajj Matovu) had a relative who was in a near-coma after his biopsy, and he agreed with my mother and grandmother.

More relatives including my father, my stepfather, and Uncle Kawoya opposed the procedure. Kawonya cautioned me that in his place as a learned science teacher a biopsy was important but he did not want me to make the decision independently. "I had been in a similar situation like you, when our mother (Hajjati Safiya) was sick," he recalled. "I decided to do the biopsy despite strong family resentment and when she died some of her siblings never forgave me."

But some of Mamma's old colleagues, the doctors she had worked with at the Muslim Supreme Council for more than ten years, offered to counsel her, but she even turned down meeting anyone of them for fear that they might just convince her to change her mind.

My father was also sick and bedridden at home, and I had been so much taken into Mamma's situation for the first four days I had been in Kampala that I did not see him. Once I finally visited him, I almost cried, as he could not walk or sit properly. I promised to take him to the hospital the next morning and called my brother Wahab to help fix an appointment with a doctor at the Mulago Hospital. The doctor, a middle-aged man, asked for the past papers regarding Daddy's treatment and they had carried only a few documents about his blood pressure and therapies for his legs. He said that father appeared to be diabetic and was perplexed about why he was not being treated accordingly.

Neither my brother nor I could answer why this path had been abandoned. I also asked my stepbrother Ibrahim, who did confirm

that a previous physician had recommended diabetes screening and treatment. Now we were worried about what the new round of tests would show. One expert showed the images which told the story of how diabetes was slowly killing our father. His sugar levels were uncontrollably high. The doctor said he had diabetes above the already harmful reading levels of 300 and the disease already had begun to take its toll on his kidneys. The leg pains and backaches were other symptoms. He prescribed for us some medications and asked us to supervise him closely and he asked to see him again in a week or two. I went to a private pharmacy in the neighboring town of Wandegenya and bought all the drugs. It was unbelievable to think that Mulago—the biggest government hospital in the country—always had no drugs. Then I dropped Daddy off in his home at Bwaise. At night, Daddy called me and asked me to speak to my stepmother Nassuna. She immediately launched into criticizing the medications and drugs we had bought because they did not appear to have any impact. She quipped that Daddy's disease was traditional and, thus, needed traditional medication. I kept on asking her to try the medications out before passing the verdict, and there was no way I was going to abandon the doctor's recommendations.

Chapter 71

The two weeks' leave evaporated before I could settle the debate about my mother's treatment. I had suggested that she travel to Dubai for treatment, but her mother insisted only if no flesh or tissue was to be cut from her body. Dubai's healthcare facilities are among the most advanced in the world, especially in oncology. In all I believed these concerns were merely based in emotion and unjustified psychologically motivated fear. If my mother delayed this decision any further, I was certain that she would die.

The standoff was taking its emotional toll on me. I remembered all the battles she had undertaken on my behalf and felt bad that I was failing to help her in the biggest crisis of her life. I thought she was wrong to refuse the biopsy or any surgery but I also knew how much Uganda's medical infrastructure had deteriorated under the aegis of Museveni's corrupt government. I knew many of my relatives whose health went downward quickly even after what is considered a generally routine procedure in virtually every other country. Most importantly, I was worried that I might not see her again.

Two months after returning to Dubai, my mother was again admitted to Mulago. She had walked on her own and had passed by the hospital mosque to offer mid-day prayers when Dr. Kagimu Magid, her old classmate in a Gombe school spotted her. He took her immediately to a ward where he ordered she be admitted on the spot so that the staff could move forward on her diagnosis and treatment. She was at the hospital for about three weeks when the results finally came. That evening my young brother Wahab called, sounding extremely tired, and asked if I had steeled myself to receive the news of Mamma's illness. I said yes, but with great trepidation. Wahab told me that Mummy's cancer had started in her thyroid and had spread so much to other organs including the lungs that the doctors predicted she would only live for a few months. I asked him if Mamma had been told of the diagnosis and he said the doctors were so open and she looked shocked.

The next day she asked to be discharged so that she would return to her home to try some herbal medications. She had lost her appetite completely and could not even walk then. I spent a lot of time on the Internet searching for any clues about what

could be done to save my mother at such an advanced stage of disease. I researched alternative medicines, finding China offered some promising options but they also were prohibitively expensive and would require the long trip to China.

India was also promising. Hajji Hussein Kyanjo, a Muslim member of the Ugandan parliament who was being treated in Dubai at the time, told me that his mother had been given two weeks only to live when she was at Mulago. However, he took her to India, and she was still living four years after the surgery and treatment. Dubai was my best alternative because I was not that financially capable, and as a resident I could pay in installments and manage hosting her with minimal costs at my home.

I went to local hospitals, where oncologists and doctors reviewed the Mulago results and some believed they could still operate and give her a longer life while others despaired and advised to do hospice treatment. I also had problems with her visa as well as documents for the person who would be caring for her, so I had to go from visa office to visa office. When I proposed to Mummy to bring her to Dubai again she hesitated and told me she was too weak for making the flight. Those close to her then told me she said she didn't want to burden me and my wife, especially since she was pregnant with our third child. My wife and I already had decided that our daughter, who would be born in October of 2012, would take her names.

My mother even turned down requests to take her passport photos in order to process her passport. Her despair seemed complete and she did not want me to know just how dire she believed her circumstances to be. I insisted and asked all her friends to encourage her to accept my proposal but these pleas were in vain. Finally, in the second week of the campaign to persuade her, she relented about having her passport photos taken but she said that she would wait to travel until she was stronger.

Unfortunately, the day after her passport was processed she had an attack, Wahab called me in the morning and told me they were readmitting her, this time in Mulago's private section. A few hours later, I received a text message that shocked me: she was expected to live perhaps another three or four days.

Chapter 72

My sister Faridah called and told me Mummy was dying, and that she and the others wanted me to be there. She told me Mummy wanted to see me. I asked for an emergency leave and returned to Uganda that night.

I met a couple of relatives leaving the hospital after they had visited my mother, and everyone had the same message: "Good, you have come on time; your mother's situation is desperate."

When I saw my mother, her eyes widened and were clear and I felt a glimmer of hope. I thought it was encouraging that she was clear and completely conscious. The doctor told me the next morning that her weakness had been exacerbated by her refusal to take in any nourishment. She had been fed only water from a spoon for almost a week. The doctor said the tumor in her throat had almost closed the entrance to allow food, and water and her breathing capacity had been severely constrained. Once the staff could provide nourishment to her, she then would become strong enough to endure the cancer treatments.

He suggested an ENT specialist would examine her that day to see if a tube could be placed through her nose to feed her. I was around when the specialist turned up at my mother's bedside, and after making all the examinations and going through her papers and scans he told me he regretted to report that the throat was almost completely closed, so there was no way he could pass through a tube. He advised us to consult a surgeon about inserting a feeding tube through her stomach. The next day the cardiac surgeon performed the examinations and concluded that she was strong enough to have the tubal procedure, adding that he had performed it with patients who were in even worse condition.

I was convinced yet extremely restless. I wanted it done there and then but there was no chance of it being so soon. He said they would book the operating theater the next day at nine a.m. I consulted with all available relatives, and at least everyone knew someone who had the tube inserted and who had managed to survive for a few years. My paternal grandmother Hajjati Safiya was one of them but while the relatives were concerned it would be painful they agreed it was necessary to save her life.

It was Saturday, July 28, 2012—the corresponding date of Ramadan 9—when I arrived at the hospital before seven a.m. to observe the preparatory procedures. I read a *Khatima* from the Quran, which represented the act of reciting the whole of the Quran in Ramadan for some cause. My mother taught me these *Khatima*, as she used to read them every holy month for her father. As I read, we grasped each other's hands. My sister Mayi had, in the past few days, asked Mamma to repeat after her the Islamic words *Lla Illah Illah Llah*, which the prophet promised whomever said them last would enter paradise. She had also asked her to say "God, forgive me" several times. I had uttered these words before to Mamma Jamida in her last days but I never thought (or wanted to believe) my mother was in her last days, so I refused to join Mayi in leading her to these words. I frowned at everyone who despaired about my mother's situation. I was fully convinced that she would go through the operation and we were going to have her alive to the surprise of many.

At a certain point as I read to her she called my name and we drew closer so she could whisper in my ear. "Sumayya," she said, referring to my sister who has autism, and who had been at her mother's side throughout her life. I got scared Mamma was also despairing.

My mother had not yet been taken in the operating theater and the midday had arrived, more than three hours after doctors said they would begin the surgery. Apparently, there were medical emergencies and I sought out any physician who could be more helpful and informative. I noted that my mother was a private patient and we were being charged accordingly so why couldn't she receive the treatment she deserved, I asked. Wahab, however, believed the doctors were stalling deliberately, unsure that our mother would survive the procedure. I dismissed his explanation, noting that the anesthesiologist had seen Mummy in the morning and cleared her for the surgery.

At around three thirty p.m. the nurses arrived to Mamma's ward with a gurney and a pile of papers they asked me to sign. I was sleeping on a floor mat just opposite her bed and immediately awakened, feeling a sudden sense of relief and I signed the papers in the presence of my siblings who were there. I had seen Mamma twice sign papers similarly for me when I was young and I needed

surgery. After Mamma was taken we had a short meeting with my siblings and relatives around, and I asked Wahab to go home and make porridge that would be ready for Mamma once she came out of surgery. I asked Mayi to make Mamma's bed with clean sheets. Meanwhile, I escorted some relatives and they promised to call at night to confirm that Mamma had safely returned from the theater.

It was approaching *Iftar*, the breaking of fast which would be around six p.m., when I returned and called Faridah to ask some cousins in the ward come with food dishes to buy *Iftar*. Five minutes later, Faridah called again using Mamma's phone. She was crying and only could manage a few words: "Yasin, Mamma *agenze*, Mamma *Afudde*!"

Mamma had died. Those ugly words still ring in my ears and haunt my nights. She was just sixty-two years old and it had been only four months since doctors discovered the first symptoms.

I wanted to be alone and vent my heartache but Uncle Kizito would always catch up, asking that we finish the hospital bill payments first. He wanted me to steel myself against the tears because that is what men do. "There will be times of crying the whole night, but you will cry peacefully if we manage to go with her body this evening," he said.

There were bureaucracies and even in private wards the staff in Mulago was not cooperative. Some demanded that we come the following day (Sunday) to do the bills and take the body, as if they didn't care she was a Muslim and religious custom required a quick burial. Only when a former schoolmate then working at the hospital among the administrators heeded our request for an accountant to receive our payments and we managed to take the body at about nine p.m. to Mamma's home in Matugga. She stayed in her new home for the last day and early in the morning we took her body to Bukkogolwa to be buried alongside her father and other family members.

The doctor who operated on Mamma called me to explain something I couldn't even understand at the time. He started the operation but after cutting open her stomach she ran out of breath, and efforts to pump in oxygen were fruitless and then she died. I now carried the guilt of having signed the papers to take Mamma to the operating ward. I thought if she was still alive she

would have cautioned me like she had throughout done so, urging me not to rush her for a biopsy. However, I didn't think she was right to delay the biopsy herself. The guilt was even more acute because Mamma had the trust to sign the papers for me twice when I needed the surgery. The one time when I had done so, she didn't return. Poor Museebeyi—Mamma's mother—sobbed, knowing that all of her children had taken a tough road. My mother had been her only surviving daughter out of the seven daughters she had borne.

At Mamma's funeral prayer I was asked to offer a brief eulogy. It was a surprise request and everyone who had seen me breaking down so often thought I couldn't make it while my mother's body lay in an Islamic coffin (*Janaaza*) in front of me, but I did. I reminded the mourners that the *Gomesi* cloth covering my mother's *Janaaza* was among her most loved articles of clothing, the same *Gomesi* she had worn eight months previously at my wedding introduction. She was seen on our introduction CD hugging friends at the Wandegenya mosque and bidding our party farewell because as a mother-in-law she could not attend the ceremony. I regretted that of all the people featured on the CD, a recording that I cherished so much, my mother would be the first one to be noted as "late."

Chapter 73

My mother's battle with cancer lasted for only four months. Cancer remains as deadly if not even more so than AIDS which already had claimed the lives of her sisters. Yet, with an accurate, early diagnosis, treatment has advanced enough to give people even optimistic probabilities of surviving cancer and living longer than the standard benchmark of five years in remission. I wished she had accepted earlier the request for a biopsy as advised by the doctors at Nsambya. Those beliefs she had and her relatives had about the biopsy prevented us from observing if, indeed, the treatment for her cancer would be effective. Now, we only have the pain of our grief.

I wish those individuals who thought they were giving information for my mother's benefit by citing those who died soon after a biopsy would now be willing to tell others that she died sooner without doing the biopsy than those who did have the procedure. I would not want to wish that no one else's mother would die so soon just for avoiding any treatment. And, to the doctors at Mulago who first diagnosed my mother and said she didn't have cancer: If the diagnoses could be wrong then what about the effectiveness of the treatments? There is the expectation that the physician would do everything right in the first place in order to ensure an early, accurate diagnosis. All of this confused my mother and she avoided the biopsy. And, the anesthesiologists who found my mother fit for the operation: How could they have been so wrong? Was it because she was a private patient, where the failed operation alone had a six-digit bill that almost doubled the costs of the five days' stay at the hospital? These questions haunted me persistently and continue to do so.

Not in life have I had as many questions about death as I did standing at my mother's grave. I had the responsibility of pulling her white linen shrouded body from the coffin, starting from her head and with others helping until her entire body was fully in our hands. Her *gomesi* cloth that covered the coffin was now hanging on our heads obscuring whatever we were doing from the view of the other mourners. One of the relatives who knew more about Islamic burials than anybody else instructed us to kneel down and we were not permitted to squat as we lowered the body into the

grave. They had to remind me two times to untie the knot on her legs so that all the clothes were free but my attention was distracted by looking at my mother's corpse which would now lay forever in the earth. I kept wondering what I could have done a day before to save her life.

I was wondering if we would ever be able to meet again? If we would still be friends? If she would ever know that my daughter still in her mother's womb was to be named after her? What was going to happen to her in that place? Whether she would ever care if I had problems or succeeded at anything?

I had countless questions and they continued piling up during the nights following the burial. And, I was embarrassed to ask any single question publicly. I mentioned this to an old school friend (Mayanja Twaha), a lawyer who said it was natural to have questions, especially concerning death in Islam. Even Prophet Ibrahim had once asked God about how the dead were resurrected. My friend suggested a book—*Kitab Al Ruuh*, because it had answered most of the questions he had once regarding the dead.

However, it was mostly in the words of my Arab colleagues once I returned to Dubai that I found most answers. I had long thought their rhetoric to be so flowery and only uttering the good sentiments but I also realized that I was desperate for this language to represent the thoughts about my mother. An office colleague embraced me and said, "*Al Bukaa Lillah*," meaning "only God was to live forever." Another said he was praying for me that God unites me with my mother again in paradise when both of us are happy—the day when man will run away from his brother, mother, father and relatives because everyone would have enough problems. Another colleague said I had to be happy that God had taken my mother in the holy month of Ramadan because all people who died in that month went to paradise. She said that there was a *hadith* supporting this assertion and I had to search for this *hadith* on the Internet. I found several discussions on the topic in which most people theorized that because the prophet had said in the holy month of Ramadan all the gates of hell are closed and only the gates of paradise are open so those who die go to paradise. Others went online to rebut the theories, saying one was rewarded according to one's deeds—good or bad—but not because of the month or day on which the individual died. Another

Dubai acquaintance told me my mother was a martyr because she had died fighting for her life in a theater—because she had been sick, because she died in her sixties, which was within the same age bracket when the prophet Mohammed had died. This was not the flowery language I had grown accustomed to hearing. Instead, these were words that truly consoled me.

I was desperate to know that my mother now was in a realm of a good life, and to know that there is still a link between us, and that I could be her hero now, as she had been mine throughout her life. And, even more importantly, she had not perished for good and that her death was not the end.

Chapter 74

When living in a Diaspora, in countries where one cannot make as many friends and expect to be seen like brothers or where the criterion to be called human being is predicated on the color of one's skin nothing consoles the individual more than having a mother. On weekends when I was bored and had nowhere to go, my mother's voice over the phone was therapeutic for whenever I felt down or depressed.

Mamma was a reference for each of my endeavors. She was the first person I would call whenever I was sick or whenever one of my children were sick. She was an inspiration in all of my success and challenges, the only one who would accept my limitations and would understand my apologies of not "having money" especially when everyone else in the family thought I had these bounties. She always encouraged me to work hard and be patient, as when I landed my first job in Dubai with *The Gulf Today*. She sent me a letter through Uncle Kizito's email, urging me to be obedient, patient and hard working. She encouraged me to go for further education whenever I had the means and when I graduated with an MBA she regretted that we couldn't make a party or have her attend the graduation.

Education was her passion. Even at the time of her death, she was still paying school fees for the many orphaned children relations in our family. In a family meeting a day after her burial we agreed to continue financing the education of every relative she had undertaken. I was assigned two girls and when I calculated the fees every term I realized that I needed almost one million Ugandan shillings ($500). I wondered how she always managed.

My mother—like millions of mothers throughout the world—was everything that I will never be able to express satisfactorily in words alone. She believed in each of her sons and daughters, always offering the foundation for the religious and secular education that would make us whole as loving, caring human beings. Even now, writing these words of appreciation seems insufficient to demonstrate just how grateful all of us are. She was always generous, thanking us profusely even when we did the smallest act of kindness or appreciation. The vacuum with my mother's absence is enormous but I can only strive to

fill it by following her model of character, love, compassion, and family with my loved ones.

Mamma had lived all her life as a nurse treating people and saving lives. She had patients who believed in the unique magic of her treatment. One such patient was a university professor whom she had treated for some chronic disease for about sixteen years. When the professor came to offer his condolences to me after Mummy's death he joked that I should have been the one coming to offer him condolences because he had thought his life was at a precarious edge. He told me that when he was in Nairobi he would take a flight back to Uganda to seek treatment from Hajjati, the name he called my mother. I consoled him as he had requested, telling him God is the one who gives and takes life, and that even with Mamma's death he will survive.

At the burial ceremony, I looked around at the graves of relatives and more than a dozen had died in my mother's arms. She was always the first to be called whenever a relative was gravely ill and to anyone familiar with families in Africa, this was not a pragmatic matter of business. She would stay with the sick relative until he or she recovered or died. Now, I prayed to God to save her from the limbo of her grave. Some of the relatives in their last days had asked her to take care of their orphaned children after their death—a request she always honored. My mother was not rich. In fact she struggled to keep the family together but the challenge grew with more orphans and much poorer relatives. When she did not have enough bedding for all of us she gave us her clothes (*gomesi*) to cover ourselves. I cannot count the number of relatives with whom we had shared a mattress and *gomesi* textiles for covering ourselves. When we started going to school, she would always give us her own bed sheets or blanket. We always competed for her best sheets. Mayi often took the sheets first until when I finally could get the upper hand by telling Mamma in the last days before a new school term started that I lost my old bed sheets. Mamma would respond, giving me her fresh bed sheets and would ask Mayi to return with the old ones. To us as children, it seemed like a game and we did not realize until our adulthood just how desperate a sacrifice she constantly made to ensure we were being cared for adequately.

She was humble to a fault and even in her later days, the gesture of sacrifice was more evident. I was surprised when she died to discover that the mattress in her bedroom was on the floor. She had given her bedframe to one of the relatives she was living with at the time.

Mamma's enduring love was matched by an equally durable sense of discipline. She would not spare a rod to spoil a child. If my mother had worn high-heeled shoes I would have had a face deformed with many divots and pockmarks. She always relied on whatever was on her feet and this was often slippers that became the tools for discipline. And, the eldest male child was destined to receive the most beatings. I wondered for many years why she was exceptionally harsh on me. She could have said instead that I had to be more hardworking and creative than my sisters. Even when she couldn't beat me her words alone were enough to haunt me and make me regret the mistake I had just committed. However, as she matured, she gave up on the practice of beatings and decided that only sincere, firmly spoken words could function as the most effective corrective measures. Some relatives—especially the orphans that stayed with her—found this discipline disturbing. Once a teenaged boy complained to me that perhaps Mamma didn't like him. As an adolescent he had taken up with groups of stubborn village boys that Mamma feared would be drug addicts or even thieves. She always quarreled with him whenever he returned home late in the night. I told him that as he matured, he would also realize this deterrence was made in good intentions, adding that even his own mother (if she would have been alive) would not permit this behavior.

When I was in senior two level, Mamma's unwavering and unconditional commitment to our education was most evident. She had asked me to go to school at the beginning of a second term with a cleared bank slip but she also had not given me basic commodities such as sugar. She promised to send me all these things in a week because at a shop where we had incurred debts there were still pending payments for Mayi's books and sugar. Mavi left a week earlier because she was in a candidate class. I tried to reason with my mother that sugar was at least essential but she did not respond. I thought she was convinced but I was wrong.

The next day a relative (Hajji Maseruka Mohammed) who was a teacher at our school came to our house to pick up something. Mamma told him I had refused to go to school just because of sugar and she showed him the paid bank slip. Maseruka was angry and he let it fly when he said, "A man of senior two, and you still cannot understand how your poor mother is struggling to take you to school. I must see you reporting to school today without fail."

I was disturbed after that outburst and after an hour thinking about the incident, I resolved the situation in my mind and went to the clinic in Kawempe Mbogo opposite Tivoli where Mamma worked to tell her that I was going to school. She pulled out her drawer, counted all the money she had made that morning and gave it to me to go and buy sugar and other necessities. At school I tried so much to avoid Mr. Maseruka for almost two weeks but it was during an intramural running competition that I abruptly met him. I panicked but he immediately called me over and took my hand without a single word. He handed me off to the school's disciplinary master, Mr. Bogere, who was considered the strictest and most difficult teacher in my school. All of my class friends sympathized with me when they saw what Maseruka had done.

Mamma also had a number of private clinics in her lifetime, besides being employed at hospitals. She always called these clinics or pharmacies the "Sumayya Clinic," after my sister. One time, as we were filling forms to open what would be her last clinic at Kawempe Mbogo opposite Tivoli Entertainment, I noticed again the name of "Sumayya Clinic." I asked her why always "Sumayya" and suggested that "Yasin Clinic" would also be great. She stopped writing, as she thought of a response and I thought she was considering my suggestion but I was wrong. "If you ever make your own clinic, name it whatever you want," she said, without even looking at me.

And today I know if I ever make any clinic or business it will also be known as "Sumayya," because "Sumayya" was the last word she whispered in my ear.

Our daughter was born on October 21, which also happened to be my thirty-second birthday. And like me, our daughter is the third born in the family. We gave her all the names of my late mother.