

THE STREETS OF MOMBASA

The breeze swept gently over the sea, the humid air wafting into the small island of Mombasa with discreet aplomb that evening. The sun hovered above the horizon, almost unwilling to tuck away, sending a crimson hue into the skies. Along the beaches, thousands of tourists were crammed, young and old, black and white, some splashing wildly in the water, enjoying their Easter holidays.

Khadija guided a delicate arm underneath the old man's armpit and helped him up. He had started to shiver and had requested they go back to the hotel, where he anticipated a warm shower and relaxing massage. The old man struggled, panting, and dug his toes into the sand as Khadija made one last effort to hoist him up. Slowly, they trudged along the beach, zigzagging to avoid the crowds that seemed to be milling the more as dusk approached. The old man stretched his arm and wrapped it tentatively around Khadija, who, unperturbed, guided her partner through a maze of watching eyes, playing children and further away from the seafront.

A young man strutted across, tugging onto a significantly older looking Indian lady. Khadija glanced at the couple, one of so many that could be seen late in the night ambling around Mombasa without a care in the world. She was no better herself, she knew. Every time someone cast her a scornful glare, she felt a distant attack of guilt. She instantly knew, however, that such a person was not a regular in Mombasa, for the dwellers had seen everything there was to see, with the nightclubs teeming with both old and young, mingling almost shamelessly, dancing provocatively and drinking themselves to unconsciousness.

Her peers were also in the company of whomever their boss demanded, and even though most of them enjoyed the ridiculously immoral deals, Khadija was in the business because fate had left her no option.

She was twenty one, and was the first born in a family of six. They had been seven, but one of her brothers had been shot dead during an apparent police crackdown on drug peddlers, something one of the most vocal politicians had strongly condemned. He had castigated the government for 'killing street urchins, muffling the voiceless', and had vowed to bring homeless people to the streets until the government settled them in some fictional upcountry reserves. His claim was laughable, even then, for the boys killed were not street urchins and had been fished out of a night club by the police. Their parents were unable to defend any claim made in public, for even proving the boys were simply having fun in a nightclub in the wee hours of morning would be an insane way to defend them, because the local government had imposed curfews for three straight months now and nightclubs had since been outlawed. Khadija's family had never seen the body of their murdered brother.

Khadija had never seen her father. Her mother had admitted to hobnobbing with men, and Khadija had seen several men sneak into their ramshackle house and creep out hours later. Her mother confessed that it was the only way she was able to feed the children, and Khadija understood. She sympathized, but that wasn't enough. Her mother was taken seriously ill one December, shortly before the Yuletide season, and she was put on medication.

She had contracted HIV and AIDS, and was, that December, pegged back by a terrifying bout of flu. Business could not continue.

It was then that a local tycoon, an infamous man called Musa, was asked to recruit young Khadija. At eighteen, Khadija looked much older. She boasted the physique of a twenty year old and soon perfected the art of luring men as Musa had wanted.

Musa was an old business demagogue from Tanga. He was affluent, his known wealth including a fleet of posh looking taxis, vast chunks of land in the coast and a luxurious beach hotel that was patronized by tourists from all corners of the world. He was a short, stocky man with a perfectly round face and he grew a moustache that literally covered his mouth, so that his words came out of his veiled lips sieved, people said, even as he spoke in short spurts, like a pipe squirting water incessantly, almost as if he had to think every word independently, and his eyes always looked lifeless, save for their anxious darting whenever he was cruising to a lucrative deal for himself, most of the time using unorthodox methods. He had a vast brothel where he recruited ladies in their early twenties, all of who were supposed to be at the service of male tourists who allegedly 'booked' them way before they set sail for the Kenyan coast.

Despite demands by many a moral police that Musa gets arrested, the families of the young girls were reluctant to get their source of livelihood apprehended. It was through these ungodly ventures that the girls were paid, albeit meagerly, to sustain their families. They would sleep with the guests assigned to them for as long as the guests wanted; the demands of the customer, Musa claimed, always overrode those of the business providers. As they were given a wide array of girls to choose from, Khadija found herself the source of heated battles between customers, her coming of age in the business always heralded by her boss who, the opportunist he was, hogged up all plaudits and monies that were dished out for Khadija. When the authorities came knocking, Musa slid new bank notes into their corrupt palms, and they vanished without a word, beaming and lionizing him as they trod away to watering holes for a taste of a cocktail of the various coastal spirits.

As she walked the old tourist towards Musa's hotel, a bout of regret struck Khadija like a rampant wave from the sea. She pushed away her matted hair from her eyes, reached for a railing that lined the pathway that snaked up to the hotel's front yard and dragged the old man up a step. Khadija knew this was not anything she enjoyed doing. She loathed this life and she hoped she could find someone caring enough to sponsor her through school, for she had dropped out in standard two when her brother was shot dead, and the school had, inexorably, collapsed as more girls went into Musa's industry, coincidentally after the shooting incident. They had all been above eighteen even then, but Khadija felt they could have done something useful for themselves had they been left to continue studying.

"When I was your age," the old man stammered, catching his breath as Khadija guided him onto another step, "girls of my age were married off to old men."

Khadija, straight out of her earlier thoughts, sent him a venomous look, but the old man's eyes were fixed on the rough ground underneath his feet he did not encounter the wrath evident in her eyes. He teetered, her grip on him faltering, and he thought she would let him fall.

“Pretty much what is happening here,” she muttered.

“Pardon me?”

“It’s nothing.”

The old man eased his hold on Khadija and straightened up his frame to catch a breath. He huffed and puffed, his breath laborious.

“We do not marry you. We only pay you to take care of us.”

“You waste us!” she was burning with rage. “You want our young men to marry us after you have used us, you want them to scavenge on your leftovers...”

The old man stood still and fixed her gaze on Khadija. For half a minute, their eyes locked and an unnerving silence suffused. The ocean waves could be heard now hitting the beach with alarming tenacity.

“Would you want to see your granddaughter move around with senile men, helping them up short flights of stairs because they don’t have the energy to guide themselves up and cuddling with them late into the night for a few pennies, or none at all? Would you? Would you rather she was dancing her poor body in some hideous den in the dead of the night instead of tucking away her babies somewhere so she would enjoy the night with her husband? Would you be proud to show your children what you are doing right about now?” she felt tears sting her eyes. All the emotions she had been holding inside came oozing out, crashing out like a tsunami, swirling furiously like a cyclone, and the impact hit him so hard that he reeled, and a look of sympathy flashed across his face, so he held her closer, whispering: “Calm down.”

But the aggrieved Khadija was having none of it.

“You are here with the intention to use us, to render us useless, to kill our dreams, to take advantage of our poverty, our inability to sustain our families, our weakness...”

A guest seated in the yard craned his neck and the old man edged closer to Khadija and whispered into her ear begging her to lower her voice.

She was burning with anger. Her mother was dying with HIV and AIDS, her siblings were working along the beach, carrying bags for tourists, selling groundnuts, doing all the kinds of odd, poorly paying, tedious jobs to make ends meet, and the holidaying tycoons were busy asking young ladies who would otherwise be getting married to sashay for them, to dance for them, to satisfy their desires so they could pay all the money to another insatiable glutton who used the girls to increase his already fascinating opulence.

“Listen,” whispered the old man as they proceeded towards the hotel. “I am going to make plans with you. I want to give you a job offer, or schooling offer. You are a very pretty girl, and I really want to help you. If you want to go back to school, you still could. If you want to start a business, well and good. Say what you want.”

Khadija's face suddenly glowed, and she felt her gloom lift, almost as if a heavy blanket had been yanked away and she could spot a ray of light at a distance. She turned to look at the old man and found his eyes focused on the massive doors ahead, instinctively, almost as if his mind had wandered and he was in oblivion, and he wasn't sure of what he was saying or where he even was.

"You mean..."

"Yes, young lady. I understand your pain."

They walked into Musa's hotel and encountered, in the foyer, tens of male guests accompanied by young ladies hurtling across the floor towards their rooms. A drunk guest was howling at a petite lady who was at the verge of crying, and she stood distraught, her hands clasped together in an apologetic gesture, but the man kept on shouting at her, the seemingly innocuous girl helpless as people strode past, pausing momentarily to watch the drama unfold. She had, apparently, been requested to head home immediately as her father, a fishmonger, had disappeared at sea. Her client was unwilling to let her go, unconvinced he would land a replacement that would offer her the same satisfaction.

Khadija and the old man stopped in front of a lift, and she pressed a button. The doors hissed open and they stepped into the elevator, the air dense and unwelcoming. When the doors slid shut, the old man turned sharply, almost as if he had been reinvigorated, and said,

"I want to do everything possible to help you."

There was a finality in his voice. She could tell he meant it. The fog lifted, the gloom blew away, and as the lift smoothly cruised upwards, she knew she had struck the jackpot. Never too late.

That evening, Khadija was bubbling with excitement. The old man made an array of promises, and later took her to bed.

As the moon climbed up the skies, the streets of Mombasa, ahead of Easter, teemed with life. Couples sauntered up and down the alleys, cuddling in wild gaiety, others were crammed inside tiny city parks, and others sat huddled in benches that overlooked the sea, admiring the beautiful glitter of the water illuminated by lights that shone from atop the watchtowers as soft eddies rippled against the expansive beach.

In the serenity of the night, at the shores of the Indian Ocean, with the calm sea serenading the small town, somewhere in the sixth floor of Musa's hotel, a dimly lit room, amid promises, Khadija threw caution to the wind and, like her mother, contracted HIV and AIDS.

The following morning, way before the crack of dawn, she walked out of Musa's hotel with wads of cash, crisp new bank notes stuffed inside a stolen canvas bag, and swaggered home, eager to help herself back to school, take her mother to a decent hospital, and to help her siblings get a decent house for once. There had been a late night disagreement with her client, and police would soon discover the body of the old man stashed inside a duvet bag. Khadija met her peers on the road, also walking home, many of them already carrying in their bloodstream the similar bug she had acquired that night, adorning the streets of Mombasa, nonetheless.

The streets of Mombasa were beautiful that early morning. It wasn't promised they would always be, for beneath the deceitful veil of beauty, there lay a scourge of evil that would haunt the town for a long, long time.