

A UGANDAN BOY DISCOVERS AMERICA

The immigration guy looked at him like he owed him money, but the young African man was not cowed. He knew that look, the African guy did. It was the way every security guy he had met had looked at him, and it meant one thing – money. In Uganda, the country of his birth and where he had lived most of his life, you better have some money ready if a security guy stopped you, spoke to you, or even just looked at you.

But this was an American immigration officer at Boston’s Logan International Airport, and Yonasani didn’t know how to react. Do Americans also ask for ‘chai’, he wondered? If they do, would the guy accept Uganda shillings? He really didn’t know what to do, so he just stood there, and looked back at the immigration guy, with what he hoped was a confident but innocent look.

“Why are you in the United States?” the officer asked, with the very same drawl Yonasani had heard so many times on TV. He wanted to ask the American whether he was an actor, had he ever been on TV? Maybe he had seen his films?

But the immigration guy just looked at him with a level stare, the kind he had seen Clint Eastwood use before he shot the bad guy, and told him how he had made his day.

“I’m here on holiday,” Yonasani eventually answered.

The American immigration officer’s look turned from boredom to incredulity, and Yonasani almost smiled.

“On holiday?” he asked. Yonasani’s on holiday was not the same as the American’s. He had come to America from, again?”

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Yonasani pointed to the blue passport in front of the immigration, “Uganda” he answered. Too late, he remembered his cousin’s advice that he should be very polite when talking to Americans, especially those in security. So he added “Sir”.

The immigration guy gave him an odd look, then concentrated on typing on a computer keyboard in front of him. After a few minutes he turned to another officer near him, gave him Yonasani’s passport, and said, “We might have a match.”

A match? A match to what? Yonasani was confused, surely they weren’t talking about him, were they? There must be a mistake, he wanted to explain to the immigration officers.

Then the first officer who had taken his passport turned to him.

“Could you have a seat there, sir? We just want cross check a few things”, the immigration guy said.

Yonasani sat down, which as a good thing because he was not sure if he could have continued standing, for his knees had gone all weak. In his wildest dreams, he had never thought that he