

Mama Dudu  
Meja Mwangi

By day the border post was just as depressing as it was by night, an old frontier post that seemed to have no reason anymore to exist and which appeared to have been long ago abandoned by its creators.

The sun had finally risen, scattering the cold haze and bringing with it an air of irrational optimism, an unreasonable expectation.

'You know,' the giant said, pointing at the barrier with his silver-tipped baton, 'In the old days this place was full of strange people.'

He had stepped out of his office at nine o'clock sharp as promised, dressed incongruously in white shorts and shirt, and his dreadlocks tucked under an official cap with a shiny badge that identified him as an officer of the customs and exercise department of the Government of Tanzania. He had proceeded to raise a tattered flag on a mast in front of his office hut, saluted smartly and, only then, turned and approached the travellers' vehicle.

'Welcome to Mara,' he had said with unnecessary geniality.

He wore huge Government boots, well-polished and shiny, and olive green puttees with an array of ballpoint pens tucked in the band of the right one.

His name was Bwana Fadhili, he had told them, but they were free to call him Mister Customs or Bwana Forodha in Kiswahili as other travellers had before they were all lured away by the new crossing at Namanga.

'Many travellers came here in the old days,' he informed them. 'Some going north, some going south, and some going nowhere; just helping stuff across my border.'

But no one came this way anymore, he revealed, no one except hardcore smugglers. Even those were having second thoughts after he caught two of them sneaking past his post with gemstones stolen from the diamond mines at Mwadui.

'They are buried over there,' he said, pointing to a gnarled tree about two hundred yards away, 'where they fell trying to dodge my bullets.'

Two piles of rocks marked the smugglers' final resting place. He let Ruben contemplate the sight and consider whether it was worthwhile trying to outwit him. Then he cleared his throat loudly and said, officiously, 'Your passports, please.'

The interlude was over.

Ruben handed him their passports. He scrutinised them carefully, making sure all the pages were intact and their photographs had not been tampered with.

'No visas,' he observed, inspecting the passports. 'No visas, no stamps, nothing.'

'Don't need any,' Ruben informed him.

He smiled slightly, looking from her passport photograph to Kimberly and back.

'You are very thin now,' he said to her.

She ignored him. She stood with her back against the vehicle, her bundle in her arms, and let Ruben *deal with it* as he had offered to do.

'Bwana Ruben,' Bwana Forodha said, turning to Ruben. 'This does not look like you at all, Bwana Ruben.'

'I'm thinner too,' said Ruben.

'You also have a bad beard,' he observed. 'Is it, perhaps, a disguise?'

Ruben left him to decide for himself.

'I like your hat,' he said, slipping the passports in his breast pocket.

'Thanks,' said Ruben.

'Director,' he read the logo on Ruben's cap. 'Are you a big boss then?'

'No,' said Ruben.

'You are not a director?'

'I am a director.'

'Then you are a big boss,' said Bwana Forodha. 'In Tanzania a director is a big man.'

Ruben decided to let him believe what he may. He looked them both up and down, nodding to himself all

the time, weighing them and wondering. Finally, he whipped the stick from under his arm and tapped it on the clipboard in his other hand.

‘And now,’ he said, turning to their luggage. ‘We shall proceed to pay Government duty.’

Ruben had unpacked the vehicle well before nine to save some time, he had reasoned with himself, removing everything and arranging their belongings in rows ready for customs inspection. Now with clipboard in hand, the customs man went through the luggage, inspecting the contents and checking them against a list of dutiable items attached to his clipboard.

‘What is in here?’ He brandished his swagger stick like a magic wand at a bagful of tent pegs.

‘Stuff,’ Ruben said too weary for specifics.

‘Stuff?’

‘Camping gear.’

Bwana Forodha searched his list for camping gear. His register said nothing about camping gear. He announced there would be no duty on camping gear today and moved on. Meanwhile, the dogs sniffed at the luggage scattered around the vehicle. He swung his stick at one of them, kicked another out of the way and yelled, ‘Simba! Go!’

Simba moved grudgingly back to watch from a distance as his master continued poking at the luggage with his stick.

‘Here?’ he asked of a carton of files. ‘What is in here?’

‘Stuff,’ said Ruben.

He nodded to himself, as if ‘stuff’ made enough sense, turned and pointed at the wall of his office hut.

‘Long ago, we had a big notice on that wall there,’ he informed. ‘It was a list of all the goods permitted to be imported or exported into or out of my country and all the respective duties and tariffs; so much duty to import a goat, so much to export a cow, a chicken, a radio, a watch, a bicycle ... many, many things.’

He laughed, suddenly and mirthlessly, adding, ‘You know, we had people coming through here all day long, carrying all manner of goods and things, but no one ever turned up with anything we had on that board. Whenever we added something to our list, the item too disappeared from the travellers’ luggage. Just like that, no one had anything dutiable anymore. We had to search them all. We had to strip men, women and even children and old women to find the foreign currency, the illegal diamonds, the ivory and the animal skins, and all the guns and things they knew very well they were not permitted to carry across the border.’

He looked Ruben in the eye, expecting some reaction, a confession or some sort of an admission of guilt.

‘The eyes are the windows to the soul,’ his training officer had drilled them. ‘Look inside their eyes and you will find the evil that lurks in men’s hearts.’

Bwana Forodha had practised this teaching numerous times on the people who came to cross his border claiming to be something other than what they really were - liars and cheats, thieves and smugglers, and even worse. Through their eyes he had read their hearts, discovered their dark secrets, their greed and their avarice, their fears and their insecurities.

All he now found in Ruben’s heart, apart from the usual nervous anxiety, were anger, frustration and an inordinate amount of worry. He waited for him to break down, to reveal himself in all his futile duplicity, to confess and explain what he was really doing there.

Ruben was past trying to explain anything. He just wanted to be done with it and out of there before worse happened.

When it was clear there would be no confessions, Bwana Forodha continued his inspection.

‘What is in here?’ he asked.

‘Stuff,’ said Ruben.

‘More stuff?’

‘Stuff.’

‘Stuff.’ This was not going to be easy. ‘Open it,’ he ordered.

Ruben kicked a latch and flipped the lid open. Bwana Forodha scrutinised the contents of the case, tapping the case with his stick and trying to understand exactly what it was that he was looking at.

'Camera,' Ruben helped out.

'Camera? And here?'

Ruben opened the next case, a rugged aluminium box much scratched and dented from months of bush travel. Inside was a professional camcorder dismantled and neatly packed in foam rubber.

'And what is this?' asked the customs man.

'Camera.'

'More camera?'

'Another camera.'

The man consulted his clipboard, talking to himself in Kiswahili as he did so.

'*Kamera, kamera, kamera,*' he looked up. 'Do you sell cameras?'

'No.'

'Why so many cameras?'

'I'm a filmmaker.'

'A filmmaker?'

Kimberly snorted, choking down a laugh. Bwana Forodha turned sharply, regarded her sternly. She was leaning back on the vehicle staring at the ground, the bundle held clumsily in her hands, and an inscrutable smile tagging at the corners of her mouth. He regarded her for a full moment trying to understand how she could remain so unconcerned at a time like this. Then he glanced through his clipboard and, failing to find any reference to filmmaker, turned to Ruben.

'You sell film?' he asked.

'No,' Ruben glanced at Kim and found her avoiding his eyes. 'I take photographs. I'm a photographer.'

Then he turned to Kimberly and said, 'Ok, are you happy now?'

She had on that superior, distant look that never failed to infuriate him. The customs man looked from one to the other, trying to figure out what game they were trying on him.

'We are neither importing nor exporting anything,' Ruben assured him. 'All this is equipment for my work.'

'All of it?'

'Some of it,' he corrected. 'Most of it is hers. Why is all this really necessary?'

'No one crosses my border without paying duty,' Bwana Forodha said.

'We have no wish to cross your border,' Ruben said for the hundredth time that day. 'We just want to go to Nairobi.'

'Nairobi is that way,' he said pointing with his stick, also for the hundredth time that day. 'Across my border.'

'It can't be,' Ruben told him.

'Are you telling me I do not know my job?'

'There must be a mistake.'

'Mistake?' He smiled pityingly. 'I have worked here in Mara for many years. I know where I am.'

Which was more than could be said for Ruben. Then Ruben had an idea.

'All right,' he said, 'Let's say I'm guilty.'

'Guilty?'

'For the sake of argument.'

'Guilty of what?'

'Helping stuff across your border.'

'You have done this before?'

'I have never been here before,' Ruben said to him. 'But let's suppose I was helping all this stuff across your border.'

'Smuggling?'

'If you like.'

'I do not like smuggling.'

'I'm not smuggling,' Ruben assured. 'But let's say that, just for the sake of argument, all this stuff is dutiable.'

'All of it?'

'All of it.'

'This is a lot of stuff.'

'How much duty would you ask for it?' Ruben asked him. 'For everything.'

'Everything?'

'Everything,' Ruben confirmed. 'I'll pay for it right here and now, and get the hell out of here. Everything.'

'Everything?' The customs man scratched his chin thoughtfully. 'You want to pay for all this stuff?'

'All of it.'

'Why?'

'Isn't that what you want?'

Bwana Forodha regarded him for a thoughtful moment, agitated his dreadlocks, replaced the cap and set it squarely on his head. Then he turned to Kimberly.

'Mama Ruben,' he tried, gently. 'Can you tell the truth?'

She looked at him with complete indifference.

'I'm telling the truth,' Ruben said to him.

He shook his head, tapped at a carton with the toe of his boot.

'What is in here?'

'Stuff.'

'Stuff again?'

'And insects.'

'And ... insects?' He looked up intrigued. 'What sort of insects?'

'Insect insects,' Ruben said, wearily. 'What other sort is there?'

'I advise you not to make fun, Bwana Ruben,' he said sternly. 'Customs officers do not like that.'

'I don't make fun,' Ruben told him. 'My wife collects insects.'

'Does she have a licence?'

'She doesn't need any licence,' Ruben informed. 'She's an entomologist.'

'She eats insects?'

'She studies them. She's a scientist.'

Bwana Forodha turned to Kimberly. She was staring in space, completely detached, as if she had nothing to do with any of it. She had decided to let Ruben dig himself out of the hole he had driven them into.

'Scientist?' Bwana Forodha scrutinised her with greater curiosity. 'From where?'

'Mount Kulal.'

'Mount Kulal?' He had never heard of it.

So far, Ruben had met only one person who had ever heard of it - the midwife from hell - and even she had acknowledged that it was too far away from her world to interest her.

'Mama Ruben,' Bwana Forodha tried, gently.

Kimberly decided to hear him out and turned to him, favouring him with one of her enigmatic expressions that barely passed for a smile.

'Suppose you tell me the truth,' he said to her. 'Suppose you tell me whose baby it is. I will believe anything you tell me.'

'Anything?' Some hope crept in her voice.

'Anything,' he assured.

Ruben braced himself.

'Do you know the Chalbi?' she asked him.

'The Chalbi?'

'It's a desert?'

'A desert?' Bwana Forodha shook his head.

He had heard of the Sahara, the Gobi, and the Kalahari deserts, he admitted, but he had never heard of the Chalbi. Kimberly offered to tell him about it. He paused to consider the offer. Was it worth his time? They were as guilty as sin, he suspected, but of what sin he was eager to find out.

'Let them think you are a fool, if they want to,' his training officer had taught him. 'Play with them a little. A little cat and mouse game to make them think they are getting away with it. If you give them enough rope, they will tie themselves up with such knots of lies they cannot wriggle any more. Then, just when they begin to think that they are safe, that they have tricked you and fooled you, you pounce on them like a hungry lion and wring their silly necks.'

'Tell me about the desert,' Bwana Forodha said, crossing his arms.