

Exiting the terminal doors, Lizzie was immediately confronted by smiling and waving Ugandans. They called out in English, or Luganda, or one of their other dialects, and there was much pointing and hugging as they greeted their arriving friends and relatives. Despite the early hour, many members of the crowd were dressed up in their cultural finery. Older women wore their *Gomesi*, floor-length, brightly colored dresses with a square neckline and short, puffed sleeves. The dresses were tied with wide sashes placed below the waist and over the hips. Lizzie felt pleasantly surprised by the generous size of most of those hips, and immediately more confident about her own appearance. Some of the men wore suit coats over long flowing garments. The rest of the members of the excited crowd appeared clad in a hodge-podge of clothing types and levels of quality. American T-shirts seemed to be one of the staples with the boys, along with jeans and flip-flops. Many of the young women wore stylish European outfits and braids with vividly colorful accents. The public lighting outdoors proved sparse, but the locals came prepared with flashlights and kerosene lanterns. Obviously, by the size of the turnout, Lizzie's fellow passengers had been able to communicate the flight arrival change to their contacts.

Lizzie's eyes swept futilely over the noisy crowd. She prayed for the tall presence of Pastor Kajumba. Deep down, she didn't really expect to see him, but his confirmed absence rattled her anew. Many of the Ugandans held signs with hand-written names, and they continually waved their lights across them. She checked each one just to be sure, but her name remained missing. Lizzie's exhaustion rapidly shifted into panic. Jason Bourne didn't help in the least. What should she do?

Eventually, she cleared the crowd of greeters and now faced a collection of Ugandan cab drivers, hawking their services. The taxis consisted of two types: white vans with a row of blue squares painted around their middles, suitable for taking multiple people to various destinations;

and small private cars, mostly white, which were called *special hires* and took one person to one destination. Some of the vans did a brisk business, loading up newly arrived Ugandans and their hosts. Fat suitcases and boxes were muscled onto the worn cargo racks on top. Full vehicles pulled out in a blare of horns, the happy crowd rapidly thinning. The arrival of Lizzie, however, with her bags in tow, and a lost look painted across her face, brought new hope to the collection of disgruntled drivers still waiting for a fare.

Calls of “*Muzungu! Muzungu!*” could be heard as they rushed toward her, jockeying with each other for her attention. Since all the taxis faced the terminal and most of their headlights were on, Lizzie only saw silhouettes of the men calling and gesturing at her. The headlights glared in and out of her eyes as the men passed back and forth in front of them.

“*Muzungu*, over here!”

“Cheap taxi, lady!”

“*Mumerika*, over here! Look!”

One suddenly blocked her way. “Hey *muzungu*, where to? Let’s go!”

She turned and angled around him.

Another pulled on the handle of her bag. “Best taxi, yes?”

“*Ogenda wa, nnyabo?*” shouted another as he grabbed the other side of her bag and tugged against his rival.

Lizzie jerked back control of her luggage with an audible grunt. She turned away from them all, but the drivers pursued her.

“Where you need ride to, lady?”

“We help. Come with us.”

“No problems, lady.”

Lizzie finally glared at them and shouted. “Stop it! Stop talking and listen!”

Shocked at the outburst, the drivers stood still.

“I need to go to Kampala. Wobulezi School. Do you hear?”

There was a lull. At first, no one responded. Then a few called out, “Kampala, okay!”

Lizzie persisted. “No! Not just Kampala. I said the Wobulezi School in Kampala. Who knows?”

A few voices echoed back, sounding puzzled. “Wobulezi? Wobulezi?”

A nearby driver stepped up. “No problem, get in, we ask.” He pointed to his van and bowed lavishly like a hotel doorman.

A few of the others started up again, not to be outdone. “No! *We* can ask. Lady! Over here!”

Soon they were all once again shouting and struggling to regain Lizzie’s attention.

One of the men from the *special hire* cars pushed through the noisy van drivers and placed himself in front of them. He was middle-aged, his hair cut high and tight. His eyes were large and he was better dressed than the rest of the men. He wore a grey baseball cap and doffed it before addressing her in a polite tone. “Madam, did you say Wobulezi School? The one in Makindye District?”

Lizzie looked at him with unabashed relief. His English pronunciation was excellent. “Yes, that’s right.” Her voice was failing and her throat was dry. “Do you know it?”

“Of course. I have a young nephew who went there.”

Lizzie brightened with sudden hope. “Really? Do you know Pastor Kajumba or Mrs. Birungi?”

The man shook his head gently. “No. I am sorry.”

Lizzie let out a frustrated breath. “But you could take me to the school?”

“Of course.”

“How far is it?”

“About forty-five minutes.”

Lizzie was momentarily shocked but shook it off. She had no idea that the school was that distant.

The other drivers saw their fare slipping away and made some last appeals. “This is *special hire* driver—not taxi!”

“Too expensive, lady.”

“Don’t believe him.”

The *special hire* driver’s eyes flared, and he took a threatening step toward the van drivers.

“*Vva mu kino! Osise ekira! Genda!*”

Shocked at the anger, Lizzie looked confused. “What are they saying? Aren’t you a taxi?”

“Yes, lady. I am for hire, same as them.” The other drivers backed off, but their expressions looked foul. “They have van taxis and they pile in riders, each one paying part of the fare. That’s why they say they’re cheaper. But it’s crowded and makes many stops. I am a *special hire* car. You are my only passenger, and I take you directly to your destination. I am more expensive but also safer, more private and faster.”

“I see. How much will you cost?”

“From the airport to the school...maybe, 100,000 shillings.”

One of the nearby drivers called out, “Too much, lady. We do for 70,000.”

Another shouted, “No trust him, lady.”

The *special hire* driver glared back at them. “*Kitte, Mbwamwe! Wange! Zikira bwoba omanyi kyoyagala!*” The muscles in his jaw pulsed in anger and then relaxed.

He turned back to Lizzie and calmly motioned for her to walk with him away from the other taxis. “Perhaps we could go to a quieter place to talk. You look so tired.”

Lizzie fretted over the verbal exchange, but she nodded. She was fed up with the pushy cabbies. The sound of their language grated on her ears. Her weariness threatened to overtake her. She remembered again just how thirsty she was and figured that she must look a fright. Pushing a few wayward clumps of hair out of her eyes, she followed along behind the driver. He smoothly took control of her bags and guided her to his car.

When he opened the back door for her, Lizzie balked. “Wait. I haven’t decided that I’m going with you yet.”

“I understand, madam,” he replied smoothly. “I’m just offering you a place to sit and some quiet, as I said. Nothing else, yet. Trust me.”

She sank into the soft seat and sighed. “Okay. Thank you. Just so you know, I don’t have any shillings. So, how much is 100,000 in U.S. money?”

“About 30 of your dollars. And you won’t have to convert it, I can take American cash.”

Lizzie thought for a short time. It didn’t seem that expensive compared to taxis at home, even Uber. If she rode for 45 minutes in any city in the U.S., she’d expect to pay a lot more than that.

“Are there any other charges? Or extras I don’t know about?”

The driver smiled serenely as he leaned an arm on the roof of the cab. “No, lady. Of course, not. No hidden fees. Not like those other taxis.”

Lizzie closed her eyes and took a deep breath, even more aware of the comfort of the seat and the pleasant receding of her earlier panic. She opened her eyes and looked up at the patient driver. “I’m sorry I’m so slow to decide what to do.”

The driver gently tapped the top of his car and stepped back to give her space. “Take your time. Rest. I am in no hurry.”

Lizzie felt awkward and defensive. “You understand that my flight was unexpectedly changed. I mean, my people would have met me here, for sure, but I was unable to call them.”

The driver nodded slowly.

Much to her embarrassment, Lizzie began to cry. “That’s the only reason I’m in this situation!”

The driver came back close enough to softly squeeze the top cushion on her seat. “You will be fine. If you wish, you can stay at the airport until the sun comes back. Their chairs are uncomfortable, but you will be safe. Your friends should find you by then, yes?”

Lizzie nodded and turned away to rub at her stupid tears. She faced him again and put on a brave front. “The Wobulezi School has boarding students, so I’m sure someone will be there to help me.”

“It is up to you, lady. I can walk you back to the airport or just put your bags in the trunk and be on our way? What do you want?”

Lizzie slumped back into the plush seat and held a breath. She let the air out and glanced at the driver. “Let’s go.”

He gave her a quick smile, stowed the luggage, and carefully shut her door. As he walked around the cab, he snapped his hat back on. It was grey with a black Nike *swoosh* logo on the front panel. Lizzie saw him scowl over at the other drivers and tip his chin up in a dismissive taunt before climbing in. She felt an odd twinge of apprehension, but it faded as the car lurched into motion.

They departed for Kampala, following the Airport Road north through the town of Entebbe.

Lizzie rolled down her window and let the moving air cool her face. The humidity made her blouse stick to her skin under the Safari vest. She told herself she'd be losing that layer as soon as practical. She imagined how nice it would be to take a long shower—whenever that might happen here, if ever.

As the taxi continued down the divided highway from the airport, Lizzie understood why everything felt so peculiar. The driver sat on what to her was the passenger side of the car. Her senses kept warning her that they were on the wrong side of the road. She, of course, knew about this ahead of time but, like so many other things, actually living it was much different from imagining it. She kept reassuring herself that everything would be fine.

She looked outside. Silhouettes of unfamiliar trees clicked by the window. She watched a moon path reflection in the nearby lake race along beside the car. The surface of the water was unruffled, she realized, because the wind on her face was artificial, caused totally by the forward motion of the car. Lizzie studied the black water, wondering what hid beneath it. She was reminded of her thirst. When she first got off the plane, she had meant to check the airport for shops, but one thing had led to another, and she'd forgotten. It irritated her. But now she recalled that it had been the middle of the night, so it didn't matter, nothing would have been open, anyway. Her mind felt sluggish. She loudly cleared her throat in frustration.

The driver looked back. "Everything okay, lady?"

"Yes. I'm just tired and thirsty. I'm not used to the heat."

"Where are you from in the U.S.?"

"Minnesota."

The driver smiled and played with the name. "*Minn-ee-sow-da.*"

“It’s a state—an area—of the country. I’m near the city of Minneapolis.”

*“Minny-apples-sus?”*

“Close enough,” she said as she sighed. “It’s cold there now. Not like here. It’s so hot.”

The driver laughed. “This is not hot. Just wait.”

“Well, it’s hot to me.”

“Sorry, lady. Do you have drink?”

“No. I thought I could get some at the airport, but...I couldn’t.”

They rode together quietly for a time and then the driver spoke again. “I can get water for you. There is petrol station ahead. They sell water, too.”

“Is it safe?” She thought of that black travel nurse from Detroit, and her warnings about water.

“Yes. Bottled water. I know which to buy. You must be careful here, lady. Many bottled water companies and many fakes. Very dangerous. Many people get sick.”

“Yes. I was told to be careful.”

“But no problem. Don’t worry. I will get the right bottles, right company, still sealed and not fake. I buy all the time. Aqua Pure. Okay?”

She wasn’t so sure about this. “Okay.”

Lizzie looked ahead to the left side of the multi-lane road and saw the lights of a KPI Petrol Station come into view. As they pulled in to the brashly painted but shabby store beside two sets of rusty gas pumps, she heard the chugging grumble of a generator supplying the electricity. The driver parked and killed the engine.

Lizzie unzipped one of her vest pockets and leaned forward. “You’ll need some money.”

The driver held up a hand. “My treat, lady. A thank-you for riding in my taxi.”



Lizzie smiled. “That’s very kind.”

“Don’t mention it. Besides,” he grinned, “water is not very expensive.”

He shuffled smoothly toward the station with a kind of joint-less leg motion, as if his knees were incidental to his feet. But then at the corner of the shop, he looked back. “Oh, and lock the doors, lady. Okay? To be safe.”

Lizzie immediately locked her door and then stretched over to lock the other doors. She nodded at the driver.

He gave her a *thumbs-up* before disappearing around the corner and into the decrepit store.

Sitting back, she found she couldn’t relax. Her eyes kept jumping around, first checking the cracked concrete slabs near the car, and then searching for movement in the distant blackness of the trees. Her ears strained for any odd sounds. A distant chorus of frogs filled the empty corners of the night. She sat up, startled. Her window was still down! Feeling exposed, she hurriedly rolled it up while inwardly shouting at herself for not noticing something so obvious.

A few minutes later, Lizzie was relieved to see the driver round the corner of the store carrying liter-sized water bottles held together with plastic rings. So happy to see him, she paid little heed to the subtle metallic gleam of something slim that glistened briefly in his hand before he slipped it back inside his pocket.

Smiling now, the driver approached her door and motioned for her to lower the glass. As she did, he peeled one of the sweating bottles free of its ring and handed it to her. “See, still sealed. All perfect. You can open it yourself.”

Lizzie nodded and twisted the cap off the bottle of Aqua Pure water, hearing the reassuring click of the seal breaking. She paused to read the crisp blue label and stare at the clear water within before taking a long drink. It was heavenly.

Back in the front seat, the driver peeled off a bottle of his own and unscrewed the cap. He turned around and toasted her. “Drink! Here is to your stay in Uganda.”

They both drank large draughts. “Good, huh?” asked the driver.

Lizzie giggled, enjoying the feel of the cool liquid caressing her scratchy throat. “Good!”

Sitting back, she cuddled the bottle. Things would work out. She felt hopeful again, and safe. Her fatigue seemed to lift, and she experienced a momentary rush of euphoria that tingled through her limbs. She tipped the bottle and swallowed some more. Had she ever tasted anything so good? The car backed up. She reveled in its motion, feeling invincible. It switched gears and headed back onto the dark public highway, continuing towards Kampala.

A short time later, an unexpected heaviness settled over her. Gradually, the repetitive drumming of the tires on the pavement captured her rapt attention. She caught the eyes of the driver in the mirror watching her. The whine of the treads drew her helpless mind, until her head lolled against the door. When she tried to sit back up, the commands from her brain failed to reach her muscles. The water bottle hit the floor, the sound peculiar and far away. Her hands were insensitive to letting it go. Her ears picked up the liquid gurgle as it emptied out by her feet. Her eyelids drooped. She squinted and blinked to keep them open.

Sudden tendrils of fear spawned in her mind. She needed to stay awake! Something wasn't right! She squirmed in her seat. She pinched her leg. She tried to recite the alphabet backwards. She only made it to the letter *W* before a fading epiphany dawned and died within her; she was only dreaming that she was fighting to stay awake. Her eyes and her mind had already closed.