

Mazimhaka
(“He Who Resolves Disputes”)

B.A. English-Writing Capstone Course Deliverable; A Short Novel

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Solomon Mazimhaka could vividly remember one of the worst days of his life. He could vividly remember the day when he had realized that his life had been doomed from the very beginning, and there was nothing he could do about it. But how could he explain this to these Ivy League old money patrons?

In fact, almost each and every item in the imposing room, along with the panel of professors just made him more tense. It was one of the opulent conference rooms of the gothic styled main administration building, with a high ceiling, low-hanging chandeliers and meticulous stain glass windows. The walls had a layer of shiny polished mahogany wood in place of paint or wall paper, and floor was covered with white marble tiles. On the floor, between his desk and that of the professors lay a leopard skin. On the wall behind the professors, above the fireplace hung a huge portrait of a stern-looking Governor David Glover, founding benefactor of the university. It was as if the whole room had been arranged to purposefully remind the candidates of their place, albeit subtly.

“Mr. Mazimhaka?” Dr. Lweza’s concerned voice startled Solomon. He had been trying to find the right words to answer the question, but words at this point seemed impotent.

He glanced at the cover of his dissertation manuscript. The bold words of the title seemed to be staring, even mocking him: “*Cursed: A Philosophical Reflection on Select Individuals’ Perceived Bad Fate.*”

The silence was deafening. Patiently, Lweza nudged: “Solomon, it’s okay. Try to relax. Just try and remember whatever it was that inspired you to write on this subject.”

He still sat motionless, as if in a trance. At first he had panicked, trying to quickly do some damage control. But as he tried more and more to find the words, his mind simply froze. It froze his consciousness and his entire person in the present, and instead vividly revisited another moment in his life, a moment so far away in time.

“Solley” (which rhymes with “sorry”), as all the boys called him wished he had never been born.

Why couldn’t they understand? He wondered. Why did they all hate him so much? What had he ever done that had been so terrible for him to deserve such punishment?

The whole school, right from the primary sevens (7th graders) to the primary ones (1st graders) that whole week could not stop talking about the homo that brother Taylor had revealed on Monday morning prayer assembly after a tip-off. All the boys who were recounting the story kept cheekily mimicking brother Taylor’s deep voice: “It has come to our attention that Solomon Mazimhaka of P.5 prefers to be kissed by fellow boys!” Anytime someone cut ahead of him in line at the mess, or anytime he dared to contest a dorm cleaning duty turn, Solley was quickly reminded that as a homo, he had no business saying anything to any other normal person. The only day the school had ever experienced such excitement was when the only girl in the school--Jill, the nurse’s daughter had arrived.

The prestigious St. Francis Boys’ Catholic Boarding Preparatory School at Kkobe Hill had an expansive tract of land overlooking the dead town of Kyengera and the swamps of river Mayanja on the outskirts of Kampala. Run by the Catholic Brothers of the order of St. Francis of Uganda, it was one of the select few elite schools that every old money club patron or politician felt compelled to take their heir. Rich in tradition and academic excellence, the school featured a grueling mix of tedious classroom instruction and the typical catholic co-curricular discipline. In the center of the plateau was the assembly ground of dusty gravel, in front of the flagpoles and the primary five-classroom block. A cluster of more red brick simple yet durable bungalows circled; classroom blocks, the staffroom and headmaster/brother provincial’s office, general and mess halls and the dorms on the peripheral. Beyond the main complex lay the sports grounds; stadiums, courts and the pool, and even further, stretching as far as the eye could see was lush greenery dotted with mango trees in the school farm, that dreaded hell on earth where even the meanest of bullies were broken down during punishment-chores. Everyone agreed it was three times better for one to be suspended than to be placed in the care of brother Kizito, the farm manager.

But it is almost funny what happens to a place even as big as St. Francis once one gets into trouble. That whole tract of land shrinks and one feels as if the only place to hide is underneath it indeed. This is what Solley was thinking as he sat under the mango tree near the entrance of the farm. Every laugh, every yell, every sound that rhymed in the least bit similar to “homo” startled the 11-year-old primary five pupil. Nearby, a group of primary ones was playing “dool”, a game a bit similar to pool, only played on the ground, without sticks and using rocks as balls. Solley had started concentrating on the game, temporarily forgetting his ordeal when something happened that rarely did.

Solley did not have that many friends. He was of below average height for his age and was not muscular, unlike the ones who played sports, had an oval symmetrical face with sleepy eyes and a long nose. This nose, along with his light complexion was also an easy target for the bullies; by now many of Solley’s classmates had heard their parents complain about these stupid “Banyarwanda” (hardworking Rwandese refugees—usually long nosed and light skinned in complexion) who try to take all the jobs that truly belong to the proper citizens! At St. Francis, if the boys didn’t know who your father was, thus assuming your family was neither rich nor powerful (as everybody else’s), *and* you had a long nose and light complexion, just like the Banyarwanda, what did you expect?

This is why Solley was surprised that someone was giving him an “eye grab”, especially at such a time as this (after he was known to be a homo)! An “eye grab” was a gesture used between best friends, and among loyal “camp” (clique) members. At a very unexpected moment, someone would swiftly sneak up from right behind you and cover your eyes, only letting go after you guessed who it was. Sometimes, one would feign ignorance by repeatedly guessing wrong on purpose just to prolong the pleasure of the game. He was in no mood for games, so he simply declared:

“Okay, I don’t know who this is; just let go...”

“Man, you take the fun out of it!” replied a high-pitched hoarse voice. It was the voice of Elvis Baguma, one of Solley’s seasonal friends. Actually, shortly before the whole homo business had begun, Solley had started hoping that Elvis would become his first real friend. In fact, the homo thing had started after someone saw Elvis jokingly trying to kiss him in the bathroom. Many gay boys had tried to kiss Solley before because of his small and feminine-like stature; even some of the popular ones who were now mercilessly bullying him. Solley had never told anyone about the attempts. That day, he told Elvis about it, and Elvis couldn’t stop laughing at the whole farce. He cordially teased him about it nonstop, even during shower-hour. This is when he had mockingly acted out what he thought the boys had done. Someone had seen them and tipped off brother Taylor, who had been on duty that week. But

why was everyone making a big deal out of something many of them did? In fact, up until that very moment, Solley had not even realized that whoever had told the brothers about “the kiss” had for some reason left out Elvis.

“Hey Solley! Solley! Wake up, man!” Elvis’ hoarse voice jolted Solley from his disturbed thoughts.

“Come on, Solley!” Elvis went on, “are you gonna let this ruin the rest of your life?” Solley shifted his attention from the game of “*dool*” he had been absentmindedly watching and took a close look at Elvis. Elvis had bushy eyebrows and a pair of small glaring eyes to go with them, a combination that made him look a little tough. That, and a very thin but visible early mustache made him score some points with the popular boys. Plus, Elvis was Solley’s height but had some muscles.

“I don’t know Vee...I don’t think they’re gonna forget this one...”

“Oh come on, Solley. Even Jill has a bunch of friends now,” reassured Elvis. He put his arm around Solley’s shoulders, then tried to cheer him up.

“Did you hear what happened to Jake?” Jake Twinomugisha was the section A class monitor, a position always given to one of the most popular. Grades were divided into A and B, each with about 25-40 pupils, and P.5A was Elvis’ section.

“What happened?”

“Well, matron Liz found his sheets and mattress soaked and made him take them out. You know he’s a seasonal bed-wetter--”

“Whoa! Him?”

“Yep...we were all shocked.” The two sat silently for a couple of minutes. Solley got back to (absent-mindedly) watching the primary ones’ *dool* match, while Elvis tried to think of a way of cheering him up. Suddenly, he remembered.

“Are you sure there’s nothing I can do to cheer you up?” Elvis mischievously asked Solley, in a tone of voice that told Solley exactly what he meant.

Normally, Solley would have been infuriated at the slightest hint of someone asking him to do something that would only add to his problems. He was not a goody two shoes of course and had no problem with the occasional sneak into the farm to steal mangoes or even taking formulae into a test. However, Solley was fast realizing that what had happened to him recently was no ordinary bout of trouble. Just as Joachim Pulkol or “Stinky Joe” had forever been damned thanks to that one incident in the first grade when he had peed all over himself, Solley was going to have to just deal with being “the fifth-grade homo”. Since his good name could never be salvaged as far as the brothers were concerned, Solley figured he might as well use his tarnished reputation to his advantage and have some fun. Who knows, Solley thought, maybe he could even become one of the official “rebels”, the cool “bad boys” of the school. After all, now he could never become one of the cool “goodies”—the prefects, neither could he join one of the many neutral “cool cliques”—like those of diplomats and central government ministers’ kids, old money, the nouveau riche kids etc.

“Sure,” Solley finally replied. “Meet at me at the usual spot after evening prayers.”

At the agreed time and place of the rendezvous, Solley awaited his new friend. In fact, Elvis was, at least as of now his only friend. He really hoped this would become permanent; even the weirdest boys had at least one permanent friend, someone they could talk to every once in a while. Up to now, this had evaded Solley. He did not want a “best friend” or anything nearly as fancy. All he wanted was at least one person he could call a true friend. The more he thought about it, Solley realized that in the entire school, only a handful of kids, him included could fit the definition of “loner”. Wow. If finally, after four years of primary school Solley was going to have a friend, then this whole homo business had not occurred in vain. A loud thump near one of the windows in the dark and dingy locker room jolted Solley

out of his thoughts. It was Elvis, making his entrance through the window. Solley stumbled back and made a loud noise with his shoulders hitting the locker he had been leaning on, only to be shushed by Elvis.

“Where have you been man?” whispered Solley.

“I had to be careful on my way here”, Elvis whispered back. “You know its brother Bwino on duty this week!” Brother Bwino was good at patrolling the school after lights out, they all knew better than to have “convos” or ghost story sessions as long as he was on duty. Yet here they were, about to find and shred the chore defaulters list from one of the prefects’ lockers. It was the ultimate thrill; doing something so sweet, so taboo and all the while knowing that getting caught meant paying dearly indeed.

The two then continued with endless niceties and small talk and fidgeting, putting off the main course for as long as they could. Eventually, the small talk ran out, and the uneasy silence followed. This was always the most difficult part. Solley could feel the nausea, butterflies, and the sound of his own heavy breathing. Elvis told Solley to start picking the locker padlock as he staked out the balcony to make sure Bwino wasn’t nearby.

The events were simultaneous. A flashlight beam focused directly onto his face, and a bunch of excited blubber broke out; around 5 to 7 voices. Solley singled out one of the voices as that of Jake. He confirmed that a half minute or so later, when Jake switched on the light and Solley stared at the Elvis’ five classmates, along with two prefects, both primary sevens. He immediately realized what had just happened, and the answer to the question he had been battling with earlier was clearer than ever. The sly look on Elvis’ face was more than enough confirmation. It had been a set up from the start. Elvis, the “true friend” he had been hoping for had set him up just so he could join one of the cliques, or perhaps become a prefect. Elvis had started the whole homo scandal.

In reality, it had only been a minute or less since Dr. Lweza had asked the question, but the tense silence made it seem like an eternity. The defense had been running smoothly for over thirty minutes. In fact, the candidate had been answering the panel’s questions very brilliantly, and this is why they could not figure out why this particular question had made him react the way he did.

The panel had three professors. Dr. Lweza, the doctoral candidate (Solomon)’s main professor, Dr. Edward Taylor, the head of the philosophy department, and Dr. William Charneski, a senior professor. Solomon had first had Dr. Charneski as his main professor before joining Lweza. He had heard the rumors about him being unnecessarily stringent and unhelpful but had ignored them. He could handle it, he thought. Besides, Solomon didn’t want to join Dr. Lweza because he thought Lweza would be too soft on him, what with the very close relationship they had. He was wrong on all counts. A very ambitious Charneski always had a gazillion meetings and seminars to attend and even more journal articles to write, yet he always ridiculed ideas. He would never edit or suggest ways to improve them; he simply shot them down. On the other hand, as soon as he joined him, Dr. Lweza provided Solomon with endless helpful lists. Of colleagues’ contacts--experts on the subject--at other universities, publications and current research connected to the subject. Nevertheless, he always demanded the most stringent adherence to fact checking and close examination of these sources’ research, among other high standards.

Lweza had also panicked at first after Solomon froze, before he realized what was going on.

It was not the first time he had seen that look on his face, and it would not be the last.

Glover Hall University in Virginia was picturesque. It had two small lakes, five ponds, and a river passing through it. Nearby, the forest reserve, one of the biggest in the United States provided a hunter’s paradise with endless game to choose from, with deer and duck the easiest targets. Oaks were everywhere; along the redbrick footpaths, on the neat thick green grass lawns, even on the medians of the driveways.

It looked like a big cluster of antebellum plantations. Many buildings had white and red brick façades with roof-high Corinthian columns on the verandahs. The new classroom and office blocks, entertainment and other multi-purpose halls had a simple, yet clean cutting-edge look; see through glass and stainless steel. The inside of these buildings was a whole different story. “Functional Coziness” seemed to be the theme of the decor. Bright color paint, sofas, even lava lamps in the lounges and hallways! This interior design, which was a bit eccentric for a university, might have raised a few visitors’ eyebrows every once in a while. But the students liked it, and the faculty did not complain.

Doctor Martin Ssekitto Lweza, a new professor in the Philosophy department was in one of these buildings, in the cafeteria of University Student Center. He had actually been admiring it that day before his mind wandered. He was sipping an espresso in the corner near the pool tables. Every once in a while, giggling sophomores would pass by and wave, and the young men would offer a pretentiously humble “Hey Doc!”

When would they ever have such buildings in universities in his native Uganda or anywhere else in Africa, he wondered; probably never. He had been asking himself questions such as these for most of his adult life, especially after he had moved to the United States all those years back. In fact, he realized, it had now been thirty years to be exact! Wow, he thought. When one’s life makes a trip to hell and back, maybe time does fly by. One probably becomes oblivious to such concepts as menial as “time”.

His grandfather, Sir Harold “Harry” Lweza was one of the Buganda kingdom chiefs that had signed the Buganda Agreement of 1900 with the Imperial British East African Company. They had been trying to ensure the continuity of the kingship while getting themselves a perk in the process, if millions of square miles of fertile lake-side land, half the entire kingdom can be called that (a “perk”). Yes, they had been a bit greedy, but they had saved the kingship. Henceforth, the British protectorate, later the independent republic of Uganda was born.

Martin had had an enchanting childhood. He attended St. Francis during the school term. In the holidays, especially the longest after the third term (shortly before and after Christmas), him and his siblings, as did many other chiefs’ kids would take turns having sleep overs at the palace. The king loved children. When he was not attending to matters of the state, canoe-fishing, hunting and flying lesson trips occupied him and his children and their guests. Martin’s maternal grandfather had been British, one of the few colonialists that had married the natives. These long holidays provided the best opportunity for the family to visit their connections in England, with whom they kept in close contact. Martin loved everything about London. The good British manners, the Marks and Spencer stores, the parks and sidewalks of West End by the river Thames.

Every time they visited, he wished they would not return to Uganda. Only two thoughts comforted him. That he would return the following year, and that the journey back would be fun. In those days, Uganda could not service big planes. Only medium sized seaplanes could land on lake Victoria at Entebbe. These would then go to Nairobi, from where they could fly directly to London Gatwick or Heathrow. The return journey was the same.

After finishing secondary school, Martin’s father gave him three choices. He could go on to either the new London University College at Makerere in Uganda (the only university

in the country at the time) or any other university in England and continue his studies, or he could get married immediately and go into managing the family’s vast estates.

He chose neither. One of the princes, his best friend from their St. Francis days was planning an excursion into America. One beautiful April day in 1962, as their parents were negotiating for the country’s independence in London, they set off for America. Martin could remember how he had felt as soon as they got off the plane in New York. He loved America, much more than he loved England. The people; black, white, Asian and Hispanic, all a bit suspicious of each other and yet somehow united, the expansive territory (50 states!), but most of all, the freedom. This country gave him a feeling of pure, unadulterated freedom.

Prince Simon Walugembe and Martin started a tours and travel agency in New York, targeting the then wave of “enlightened” blacks who wished to visit “the mother land”.

After their success in America, Martin returned to Uganda to expand and co-ordinate their business there; Simon would stay and manage affairs in the states. Martin set up not only a branch of the Tours and Travel, but also the country’s first five-star hotel in Jinja, near the Owen falls dam on the river Nile. His father had started warning him of tough times ahead when he was still in the states, even suggesting he should perhaps suspend their expansion plans and stay in the states for safety. Prime minister Milton Obote seemed intent on a stripping the kingdom of Buganda of its superior status among the other kingdoms of the country, and in fact, the ceremonial president, King Sir Edward Frederick “Freddie” William David Walugembe Mutebi Luwangula Mutesa II was mulling a possible “expulsion” of the central government administrative offices from his land.

But even as the political feuds grew worse, Martin, like other ordinary Ugandans stood his ground. He refused to go into exile. Obote started nationalizing all the investments in the country he could lay his hands on. By now, only a couple of plots of land remained of the thousands of hectares their family once owned. The hotel and travel agency was surviving, but Martin did not care; property could be replaced but human life couldn’t. In 1969, king Freddie was assassinated, as were scores of his men with whom he had escaped to London. Among these was Harold Lweza II, Martin’s father.

Idi Amin took over and the killing sprees continued with a vengeance. Shortly after, Martin’s mum and two sisters disappeared. In those days, that only meant one thing. In fact, Ugandans knew better than to ask about anyone who disappeared, lest the same fate befell them. Men wearing sunglasses and driving Peugeot would just show up and stuff you into the car trunk, never to be heard of or from ever again. But the funny thing about this era too was that men’s fortunes could change in the blink of an eye; a big “gift” for a tip to the army about rebels’ hideouts or a bonus from the president on any day he felt happy. Martin was about to find out for himself.

General Amin used to be weary of all the usual spots frequented by the Kampala establishment. He knew that many of these patrons were Obote’s cronies and didn’t like him much, so he got into the habit of hopping around different clubs, lounges or restaurants.

One day, while on his way back to Kampala from commissioning a new air force academy in the Jinja town center, Amin stopped by Simon and Martin’s hotel, the Jinja Owen Falls Hideout Inn . Martin had been helping out since the manager had disappeared the day before. As he was asking clients in the restaurant how their meals had been, he saw the entourage make their way into the lobby, where the president stopped to stare at the Picasso above the fireplace.

Martin had seen the man countless times on T.V but was nonetheless taken aback by the gigantic stature of the infamous leader. Idi Amin in the flesh! More than six feet tall with a very dark complexion, a round dimpled face, and a port belly. Feigning calmness, Martin approached the general.

“Mr. president, it’s an honor”. Amin’s hand swallowed his, and the grip almost made him scream. Indeed not one to mince words, the general quipped:

“Who’s the owner of this place? I’ve never heard of it. It’s beautiful.” His voice was neither deep nor soft, but had a consistent, smooth, authoritative and confident tone. Martin stammered:

“It’s--it’s mine sir...” Amin studied Martin with a steady gaze. Martin swallowed. Amin was a very paranoid man, and anything could happen now. Most likely, the general would “investigate and find out” the source of Martin’s wealth (read accuse him of rebel collaboration), and that would be his end.

“Well do you have a name?” Timidly, Martin whispered:

“Martin--Lweza--”

“No! *The* Chief Lweza is your father? *Mungu yangu* [my God]!” General Amin broke into a hearty laugh, then grabbed Martin in an embrace. He revealed to Martin that he had actually met the chief once, and that he was sure his son was just as nice as him. Apparently, Martin could tell that the general had had no bad feelings towards the old man. He could also tell that indeed, as rumors had suggested, Amin was not half as bad as he seemed; many of his State Research Bureau (the internal intelligence organ) operatives (men driving Peugeot in sunglasses) were rogue and committed the atrocities on their own, usually after trying to extort money or while fulfilling personal vendettas. This must have been the way Martin’s mum and two sisters had “disappeared”.

But one of his many weak links was that of women. He was a very possessive man, and he assumed that any woman he liked him too, and thus was not to be touched by any other man. Unfortunate for him, Martin did not know this. Joyce, the Rwandese in-house masseuse had had a crush on him for long, but at the time, relationships were the farthest thing on his mind. But just as his bad luck would have it, the day he decided to take her up on her offer was the day one of the men in sunglasses was in the hotel. Apparently, she had caught the general’s eye, and he had told “the men” to watch over her.

As Martin finished taking a shower after doing it, he heard her scream. Normally, of course, Martin’s reflexes would have made him go into the room to try and help her but somehow, he knew that this was no ordinary stick up. With only a towel wrapped around his waist, Martin jumped out of the small bathroom window into the shamba behind the inn. One of the locals, a radical Buganda loyalist gave him some clothes and money and sneaked him across the border to Kenya in his car trunk.

In Nairobi, the capital, Martin managed to locate some exiles who helped him for a few weeks. He had already gotten in touch with Simon, and of course they knew what his only option was. Nairobi was not safe, neither was London. While Amin was a threat, the remnants of Obote’s men were Martin and Simon’s chief concern, and there were groups of them all over Africa and England. Assassinations among the exiles there were an everyday occurrence. These guys were determined to wipe out the entire Buganda royal clan. Besides, even if London had been safe, living with his British grandpa’s connections there would have been too painful, a reminder of the happier times that once were. All Martin wanted to do was to get as far away as he could from all this—lost peace, lost African royalty, lost property and prestige, lost family...

The only place they could never suspect—it was too big and not yet uncharted for them anyway was America. Of the entire royal family, only Simon had survived the massacres and only a handful of people, including Solomon knew where he was. There was one thing Obote and Amin had not taken and could never take from Martin, and that was hope. For now at least, the embodiment of this hope was Simon. For as long as there was at least one potential heir to a restored Buganda throne, the mother land would regain sanity.

Martin returned to America a battered man. At JFK airport, Simon took one look at him and broke into an endless gush of tears. Martin cried too.

Simon had hoped that Martin would rejoin him in the business. He was surprised when instead, Martin embarked on a career in academia. He went to Columbia, then Yale and got his PhD in Philosophy and Economics. He could have become “famous” if he had wanted; journalists, authors, even presidents clamored for the astute scholar’s opinion. Over the years, Simon’s business ventures had also morphed into one of the top 10 fortune 500s, but he had listed it onto the NYSE. Both men had the ability to harness endless power in this new homeland of theirs, but they had seen what power can turn men into. They were self-effacing humble men; best friends who teased, joked, and counseled each other. They tried to avoid talking about the past. Each was afraid to ask or say anything to the other about it.

Surprisingly, one of the people from those days that Martin always thought about was Joyce the masseuse, a woman who should not have had that big of an impact on him. Perhaps it was because she had been one of the last people he had seen before he left the country...

Of course, both Simon and Martin knew that they would have to return to Uganda one day. Simon, perhaps to take back the throne and stay for good. And Martin, if only to get the closure he needed and only then finally return to the states for good. Democracy had been restored and the current president, Joel Saleh was in touch with Simon. He had requested him to return—

“Sir, I didn’t understand the chapter; could you go over it for me some more?” The timid voice of one of his students in the upper-level Philosophy of Law course startled him. He quickly recomposed himself and cleared his throat:

“Why of course Solomon, have a seat.” The first time he had seen Solomon, Martin had been taken aback by the body and facial resemblance they shared; around five foot eleven and unmuscular with a light complexion and an oval-symmetrical face, a long nose and a thin moustache and goatee. It was just like looking at himself in the mirror sans wrinkles and some gray hair. Martin always joked with Simon about the way black Americans looked just like Africans, as opposed to the fantasies they had had about them growing up in Uganda. “So, my friend, what exactly didn’t you understand in the chapter,” asked Martin, a bit sarcastically.

“Well...you mentioned that one can interpret Patrick Devlin’s views as basically based on the fact that it is all about the principle?”

Solomon was one of the most active and insightful students Martin had ever come across in a classroom. Every once in a while he would start getting frustrated, thinking he had just wasted an entire hour of explaining a topic, only to be bombarded by a brilliant question from Solomon in the back of the lecture room, where he always sat. This would then trigger a collective “aha!”, and a hot debate by the entire class, thus helping them to grasp the concepts. “But like I said Mr. Mazimhaka, his views were in support of legal moralism. With that doctrine, society’s collective moral judgements rule, period.”

Martin was very popular with students at Glover. The few interviews and television appearances he granted were always over-publicized to his chagrin, as this only intensified the unnecessary spotlight. He had been teaching at Duke for three years before being wooed by Glover, and shortly before his arrival, the campus had been buzzing with the news. Students always acted embarrassingly around him. This is why Martin was particularly fond of Solomon. He always seemed unfazed by Martin’s “celebrity”.

Solomon had kept quiet after Martin’s response. He looked like he was trying to find the right words to phrase a rebuttal or another clever question. Meanwhile, Martin was smiling at him in a jokingly sly manner as if to say: “Gotcha!” Finally, in a somber tone, he spoke up.

“Dr. Lweza, I have to apologize. I didn’t come to talk about philosophy today.”

Martin was taken aback. “Hunh? Is everything alright?”

“Oh no, everything’s fine,” reassured Solomon. “I uh, I just wanted to share something with you.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I read that you’re from Uganda. Sorry about what happened by the way.”

Oh no, Martin thought. Not another request for an article or blog interview! But he wasn’t going to brush him off immediately, not least because he was one of his favorite students.

It was then that Martin first saw the look on Solomon’s face. A look Simon had told him he always saw on *his* face, the kind of look that appears when people who have had a lot taken from them remember that which once was, or could have been.

Martin could tell that a revelation—a big revelation was about to made. “Mr. Mazimhaka?”

A startled Solomon quickly recomposed himself. “You see Dr. Lweza, I’m--I’m from Uganda too.”

He had been expecting a bombshell, but not one nearly as big as this. “Wow. But then how come you--the accent!”

“I know. Everybody says that. The biography I read about you mentioned you attended St. Francis back there--is it true?” Martin nodded. “So did I.”

“*Mungu yangu!*” exclaimed Martin, before whistling in awe. They both laughed heartily, after realizing how quickly a mother tongue returns after one is in a motherland state of mind. “So that’s why you don’t have the accent. Tell me, was brother Taylor still there when you attended?” Solomon nodded. “That man is built of steel!” They laughed again.

“It’s actually funny. I was telling my friend Lugz the other day--”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted an excited Solomon. “*The Lugz?*” By “Lugz”, Solomon could tell that Martin meant the surviving prince of Buganda, Martin’s best friend Simon Walugembe. An AP reporter had once heard Martin refer to him that way at a banquet, and from then on the western press had cheekily referred to him as Prince “Lugz”, just as they had dubbed his father “Freddie”.

Martin nodded, smiling shyly, but proudly. “Yep, that’s him.” He was starting to like the young man more and more by the minute. “So anyways, I was telling him about you. You know how some of these black Americans sometimes have these ‘pan-African’ names? Well, I thought you were one of them!” This prompted another bout of laughter from the new buddies.

“It’s actually funny you should mention that.” The somber tone quickly returned.

“Why?” Martin asked as he took a sip of the espresso. Solomon’s face had gone back to the look of deep thought and puzzlement, and Martin was looking at him studiously in anticipation.

“Well, you know how the name-clan system is in Buganda?”

“Of course. Is your father Rwandese?” asked Martin. There are over 23 tribes in Uganda, but the Baganda were historically the strongest, most assimilated, and most sophisticated. The remaining twenty-two tribes had weaker kingdoms or were decentralized and only had chiefdoms. Each Bugandan tribe sir name is assigned a unique clan, and all kids have to be named according to the father’s clan. Solomon’s sir name, “Mazimhaka”, which means “I’ve resolved all disagreements,” was in Kinyarwanda, thus did not have an assigned clan, at least not a *Bugandan* one. Had it been uniquely Bugandan and thus *Ugandan* for that matter, it would have been “Maze’mpaka.” But in Buganda, there is no such name. Bugandan sir names were only composed up to around the 17th century. The vocabulary that was used to

compose them had been unique to only before and up to that era. The language has since evolved, just as English evolved from Shakespeare’s era to today.

“Exactly my point. Nope, pure Muganda, born and bred. I mean mum is,” he chortled sarcastically, “but what’s that got to do with it, right?”

“Precisely,” agreed Martin, “if the child has to be named according to the father’s clan, it’s a no-brainer what tribe the name has to come from.”

They were talking a bit bitterly, regretting their African traditions’ established and archaic sexist system. Sons were prized and daughters caged, scolded, ridiculed and seen as possessions. In fact in Buganda, the women had it better than in many tribes all across Africa. Over the centuries, the kings and elders had started reforming many of the archaic customs. It was this willingness to embrace change and basic universal values that had convinced the British to grant Buganda semi-autonomy within the new country, have it as the trustee kingdom, and indeed name the country *Uganda*.

“Well, she probably just gave me the name to spite dad. They broke up after she became pregnant with me,” concluded Solomon. “Ever heard of Gordon Mukasa?”

“Gordon’s your dad?” Gordon Mukasa was one of the *Johnny-Come-Latelys* of the Ugandan city tycoons, the ones who always made sure their names appeared in the gossip columns.

“Unfortunately...” Solomon replied meekly.

“That bad huh,” Martin teased. He could tell that this was not one of Solomon’s best topics, so he steered away.

Their conversation then meandered through different subjects, mostly connected to catching up on the old country. The two were enjoying each other’s company immensely. Solomon had had his eye on the professor for a long time, and indeed, good things come to those who wait. He was glad to be making such a deep connection with the professor, and he had a feeling that for his remaining tenure at Glover and for the rest of his life, Martin was destined to surpass the status of mentor, close friend and confidant.

For his part, Martin was also getting sucked in fast, like a vortex. He was intrigued by this young man who spoke and acted twenty years older. He could tell that just like himself and Simon, Solomon had had a tumultuous life in Uganda. He could tell from every wild gesture, facial expression and painful puzzled look in the eyes—especially the painful puzzled look in the eyes, that just like himself and Simon, he believed that his fate had already been decided by forces beyond his control.

But there was something much deeper about Solomon that Martin could not quite place. Something much more than his charm, resourcefulness and poetic melancholia. Something that only *he* could put a finger on, but would evade him for a very long time. He had had this feeling before, the kind of feeling one has before getting an epiphany.

Between Lake Victoria and the middle of the Entebbe—Kampala highway lies a range of hills at Bwebajja, in Wakiso district. Their slopes have rich fertile soils; guava, mangoes and tomatoes grow unabated. In their valleys, rivers meander under the darkness of the thick palm tree leaf-shades. Snakes, beetles and snails abound in the swamps, and hundreds of bird-species feast on them there while monkeys tree-hop on the palms and fruit-trees. The highest of these hills is a peninsula that sits well into the lake, atop which one is kissed by a therapeutic breeze all year round. Here, on the western slopes of this hill sits the complex of buildings that house The Eleanor Academy of Uganda.

Solomon sat at a window in the dining room, absent-mindedly watching a group of monkeys playing in the valley. All that was left of the St. Francis years were vivid painful memories. He was now in his last year of high school, and it was crystal clear that all he had ever wanted was a father. All the identity and confidence issues he had had at St. Francis; not

fitting into cliques and not knowing how to play soccer like all the other boys, having to explain to them why only his mother visited on the open days and why he had a Rwandese name, all these would not have existed if he had had a father.

As per the Ugandan education system, Solomon had completed his seventh-grade primary exams, and thus had had to move on to a secondary school of his choice. His mum assured him that he could go to any school he wanted. At the time, he had no idea that this generosity was not entirely altruistic. Dorothy Kanaani could see that her son was growing. He was only twelve years old at the time, but the teen-age years and all the deep mature questions that come with them had arrived. She knew that giving him a blank check for secondary schools, as opposed to the ones she would have preferred only meant one thing. Of course, he would choose a co-ed secular, nouveau riche one; the type preferred by western diplomats where they only have dress codes as opposed to uniforms, where they let them go home on weekends and feed them burgers and pizza, and let them kiss in the open. By letting him attend such a school, Dorothy would buy herself some precious years. He would be distracted by all the fun, and would thus have no chance to ask about the details of the failed relationship between her and his father. Those skeletons were better off left the way they were.

She was wrong. At first, the trick had worked. Eleanor was a far cry from the catholic primary school choke-hold of St. Francis, and Solomon loved every bit of it. Here, being different was praised and not frowned upon. He made lots of friends from different parts of the world, and the girls loved his shy demeanor. Sport participation was not enforced, but Solomon now enjoyed swimming and hiking in the hills. He was beginning to break from his shell. But every once in a while, Solomon was still reminded of his bastard status, sometimes subtly and other times boldly. By friends’ questions about his family, by watching them go home with their fathers on the weekends, or by hearing them tell stories about their family escapades on exotic trips. In such moments, the St. Francis blues returned, and with them the melancholia he could never share with anyone. He would then isolate himself and reflect for hours. In fact, the particular dining room window at which he was sitting was one of his most favorite meditating spots at Eleanor.

“Solomon, what are you doing here, boy? I’ve been looking all over for you” The Texan drawl of Mr. Grier, the principal, startled Solomon.

Oh man! Now what? It was a well-known fact at Eleanor that for Principal Grier to personally look for you on campus, you must have *really* pissed him off, and if there is one thing you never want to do in your life, *never* piss off Mr. Allan Woolworth Grier! At six foot four, and weighing 300 pounds, Grier had graying black hair and a round chubby face. He wore thick-lenses and had a flat nose, and his belly poured over his belt.

At first, Solomon had expected him to start ranting about a missed homework deadline or class-room cleaning duty. But almost immediately, he could tell that something was terribly wrong. How else could he explain the kind and sad look on Grier’s face? Everybody knew that the day Grier smiles, looks kind or sad will be the day Christ will return.

Nervous, Solomon asked: “Is everything alright, Mr. Grier?”

“No, I’m afraid son,” replied the Texan. “Your mother’s in the hospital. Come on, let me give you a ride.”

In the intensive care unit of the International Hospital Kampala at Namuwongo, a teary-eyed Solomon looked at his dying mother. She looked like a hideous cyborg with all the wires on her arms and chest. These relayed up-to-the-second data to the annoying beeping monitors. In her left arm, an intravenous tube delivered medicine and glucose-water. Thankfully, the oxygen-ventilator, which had been making other annoying sounds—a

whooshing and an alert beep from time to time had been switched off, and the tube had been removed from the nostrils of her beautiful long Rwandese nose. Her thick long hair, badly in need of a perm was held in a pony tail, and her skin was pale.

She opened her eyes and smiled at Solomon, and this made him sob even more.

“Hey,” she whispered, “I’m not dead yet.”

Vintage mum, thought Solomon. Even on her death bed, somehow, she tried to make light of the moment! “Oh mum...”

“Come on, son...you know you have to be strong for the both of us. Why didn’t you call me over the weekend?”

Now how could he explain to this perfect woman how he hadn’t called her, because he had been busy thinking about how terrible his life is, as if she hadn’t done all she could to raise him comfortably.

Again, just like her classic self, she read his mind. “You’ve been thinking about him, haven’t you?”

Solomon nodded, fresh tears streaming down his cheeks.

“You look just like him...”

He then asked her the question he had waited to ask his whole life, a question he knew she couldn’t answer, but which he wanted to ask anyway. “Why did he have to abandon us mum? Why?”

“Oh Solomon...you look just like him...”

Solomon could tell she wasn’t talking about Gordon. In all his life, he had never heard her talk fondly of him. In fact, Solomon had never met Gordon Mukasa in person. He just wired the money whenever she called him, and Solomon only saw him on T.V every once in a while, at a state dinner, a trade-show or a product launch.

Once, when he was twelve, Dorothy had explained to Solomon that while in exile, in London during the revolution, she and Gordon had had an affair, but she had refused to have an abortion. But if anything, that explanation had only helped create more questions than answers in his mind.

“Solomon, there’s something you need to know.” Her whispering voice startled him. “Gordon--Gordon is not your father.”

By now, Solomon had stopped crying. Instead, shocked, he stared at his mother.

“When I arrived in the U.K, I was one month pregnant. Gordon and I had met a couple of times before at the hotel... I only told him he was your father so he could take care of--care of--” she coughed, then panted briefly. “So he could take care of us...”

“Mum, who is he?”

“Poor man--” she swallowed, then panted again, “Amin was going to kill him...” She paused and stared at him, then tenderly felt his right cheek. Her hand was cold. A tear trickled down; she wiped it off, then started crying herself.

“His name is--”

Suddenly, Dorothy started wheezing, then gasping loudly. Wide eyed, she clutched her neck with both her hands and sat up, and the annoying monitors went off frantically.

A doctor and two nurses rushed in:

“Please clear the room sir,” barked one of them to a frozen Solomon. The third cardiac arrest was about to finish off Dorothy J. Kanaani.

The funeral was simple.

Dorothy’s mum, a peasant, the late grandma Lydia had escaped the first Rwandese genocide with the then six months old Dorothy. Even then, Dorothy had climbed the Kampala social ladder fast, thanks to her good looks, street-smarts, and country-girl wisdom and humility. However, the U.K exile years had taken their toll on her, and the only socialites

in attendance that day were the ones she had always considered her true friends. Indeed, they turned out to be genuine.

Solomon was numb throughout the whole affair. Dorothy’s friends were full of kindness and encouragement, but to Solomon, all this was just a really bad nightmare. Eventually, he would wake up from it. His mum was not dead. *What are you doing, you fools? Stop! Get her out of there! She can’t breathe! Mum is just taking a long afternoon nap.*

As soon as the men started lowering the mahogany gold-plated casket into the grave, Solomon let out a shrill, then passed out.

Two weeks after the funeral, Jonathan Muhwezi, Dorothy’s attorney revealed to Solomon that he was the sole beneficiary of her entire estate; the ranch at Kabojja hill, 2.5 million dollars in mixed portfolio investments, jewelry, and the cash in her accounts. Also, since he had just turned 18, the full age of consent under Ugandan law, he could cash in or invest from the trust fund that she had established for him as a child.

But as soon as Jonathan finished reading the will, Solomon declared:

“Liquidate everything. All of it.”

He just wanted to go away, as far away as he could. It did not matter where. He just wanted to get away from all the pain and the false hope. Now that his mum was gone, this place, this so-called *Uganda* was a cold, alien land. His father, who had abandoned him was a citizen here, but his beloved mum had been rejected to the end. To them, she was just another Rwandese refugee.

And him; citizen of the U.K by birth, citizen of nowhere in reality.

Absent-mindedly, Solomon whirled the spinning globe on Jonathan’s desk.

His finger landed on the United States of America.

He was sitting at the very table where he had had the first conversation with Martin, in the cafeteria of the University Student Center. The dissertation defense had ended successfully. Martin had tactfully steered him on from the tense moment, and surprisingly, Taylor and Charneski had been gracious and supportive in the end anyway.

Now what? He had escaped to America to start afresh, and for the first time in six years, he felt he was ready. A Philosophy professor indeed! His mum would have been proud of him—

“*Doctor Mazimhaka!* May I join you?” teased Martin.

“Oh shut up, you old scoundrel,” retorted Solomon.

Martin sat with his protégé while sipping from his espresso cup. “So...how does it feel?”

“Normal. I wish mum were here to see it. Oh, she’d be grinning from ear to ear, I tell you.”

Martin stared long at Solomon, trying to gather his words.

Solomon could tell that something was bothering him. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Martin was startled. “Um...” he cleared his throat, “Solomon, what was your mum’s middle name?”

Puzzled, Solomon answered: “Joyce. Why?”

“Did she ever work as a masseuse by any chance?”

Even more puzzled: “Yeah, before the exile years. She told me she used to work at the Jinja Owen Falls--”

“Hideout Inn.”

Suddenly, Solomon understood. “Oh—my—God,” he whispered.

It was an A-list affair. The who’s who of politics, including both the American and Ugandan presidents, Hollywood stars and international royalty were all well-represented. Simon had also invited the press, but nobody knew why the shy exiled crown prince of Buganda was throwing the banquet. Of course he had already told Martin and Solomon, but they were tight-lipped.

In the corner of the ball-room, at the Marriot Hotel in Washington DC, Martin and Solomon continued their conversation. They had been talking since morning, but neither of them wanted to stop.

“Wow,” said Solomon, “I still can’t believe it. And yet...it explains so many things. You know just before she died, she talked about you for the first and last time...said Amin was going to kill you.”

“Now you also know why she gave you a Rwandese name,” added Martin. “It was the only neutral option she had. She didn’t want to give you a clan-name of Gordon’s...and of course she couldn’t give you one of mine’s either.”

Simon took to the podium, and the whole room fell silent. The years had taken their toll on the prince, but the ladies still fell for him like flies. He looked just like his father, the late king “Freddie”. Six feet in height, slender, with an oval face. He had a long nose, and he always combed his hair backwards; it had started graying. He spoke in a low baritone.

“Well, you all know I’m not good at making speeches, so I’ll keep it brief. I’d like to thank everybody for coming; a special salute to my best friend—y’all know him; Dr. Martin Lweza and his son, the new *Doctor* Solomon Mazimhaka--”

A shocked Solomon looked at Martin, who was grinning “Did you put him up to this? I’ll get you back--”

The whole room gave a round of applause, and Solomon was about to die from shyness. Simon went on to announce that he would return to Uganda to ceremoniously take back the throne, but pending parliament’s approval, he would be permanently based in Washington, a compromise Martin had brokered between him and the Ugandan and U.S governments.

Solomon was elated. Every once in a while, a song he had heard at some point in his life would play in his head. That evening, the chorus of Phil Collin’s *In The Air Tonight* was playing:

*I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lord
And I’ve been waiting for this moment for all my life, oh Lord
Can you feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lord, oh Lord*

He had incurred a lot of wounds growing up; all the bullying and not fitting in, not having a father figure, and the constant sense of anxiety, because of being raised by “a Rwandese refugee”.

But that evening, for the first time in his life, he had a father. He was fitting in just fine with royalty, and he felt confident. He was ready to take on the world. He looked at Martin, and he had the same look in his eyes that Dorothy had often had. He knew what Solomon was thinking, and he agreed.