

Gifts of Flesh

By Rosemary Kyarimpa

The advert stood out clearly in the papers. The National Tourist Council was looking for smart and attractive young women to represent the country's natural attractions and abundant resources to foreign countries and potential investors. The young women candidates were supposed to be between age sixteen to twenty four. They must never have produced or given birth to a child. Their height range was required to be five feet five inches, to six feet three inches. This was a serious point in the requirements, and the big full-page advert also included the height range in figures, 5' 5" to 6' 3". All the interested applicants were asked to send their applications to the Managing Director of The National Tourist Council, and to accompany their documents with three full-size photographs taken at the angle of sixty degrees. One of the pictures was supposed to show the applicant in the nude, in order to enable the Selection Committee make an unbiased evaluation of the applicant's natural endowments. The successful candidates would be hosted to a colorful beauty pageant at Nile Hotel International, presided over by the world's most renowned beauty judges. This was a very competitive event, and the applicants must apply only if they were sure they suited the requirements. The Selection Committee's decision would be final, and no canvassing by candidates or their patrons was permitted.

As Hamurungi read the advert in *The Light* newspaper, her heart tingled with excitement. She possessed most, if not all the qualities the Tourist Council wanted. As she read on, her heart beat faster. There was a grand prize of a Hyundai Accent car, plus a return shopping trip to a country of the winner's choice! The additional part of the bargain was a mobile phone set, with a six-month air time bonus! The second prize included a return trip to the East African coast of Mombasa, where the runner-up would laze in the fine stretches of sand and the many other glorious spots of the coastal beaches. The third prize was a color television set, and a beauty box packed with multicolored make-up, imported direct from the world's leading cosmetics and beauty industries.

"Wow, what grand style!" Hamurungi exclaimed, folding the newspaper into two. She went to the right side of her bed. She looked through the mirror on the wall, supported by a rusty nail. The mirror was cracked at the sides with age. She turned her face to the right, to make use of the small sun rays that peered through the little wooden window. Not bad, she thought, as she smoothed her fingers along her chemically bleached yellow face.

Hamurungi lived in a small rented room, in the slum area of Bwaise. Her rent was paid by Kimira, her *sugar daddy*. Kimira worked as an Executive at Bank of Uganda. Hamurungi always complained to her *manfriend* about the size and state of the room, but he never wanted to listen. Instead, he said that he still had big financial commitments to settle, before he could rent or build her a better house in Kololo. It was now two years since Kimira promised to build her a mansion in Kololo. When she reminded him again, he told her to forget it for a while. Hamurungi pressed, threatening to withdraw her sexual involvement with him.

He responded with a defensive attack, and reminded her that his children had to have their school fees paid in Lincoln International School, his shamba boy's wages were unpaid for pruning the flower gardens, and he still had to book his business trip fares first class by British Airways. His wife also had to go to the sauna and massage parlor. What did she want him to do? Hamurungi's *sugar daddy* made his stand. The disappointed Hamurungi shed tears of frustration and regret. Why did she ever get sexually involved with such a crude and mean pig in the first place? She thought of how desperate she had been at the time Kimira proposed a sexual affair. She had just been expelled from school, having been found pregnant. Although she later managed to have an abortion, she could not face the prospect of returning to school.

Despite her bitter experience, Hamurungi had tasted the dangerous freedom of going out to sell herself on the streets of the city. She stole from home one night, after her mother revealed a plan of taking her to another school to repeat senior three. That night, she escaped from her home, and went to spend a night at her friend's place, who earned a living by selling herself on the streets. Hamurungi remembered clearly how she had to jump over stinking trenches of the Kisenyi slum, before she reached her friend Suzy's one-roomed house. Suzy was not working that night, so she welcomed her with high spirits.

"I am glad you have come to me at last," Suzy started, throwing her arms around Hamurungi. She went on to reassure her how her troubles of restrictive institutions like school would soon be over.

"But I feel disgusted. I wish I could go back home, but I can't. My mother wants to take me to another nuns' school, where they check girls every month for signs of pregnancy. Oh, Suzy, what can I do?" Hamurungi cried. Suzy comforted her with prospects of being able to get herself a reliable *customer*. Her troubles would certainly end, if she was lucky enough to land on a generous buyer. Suzy and the other girls usually got their luck whenever they landed on a *muzungu* or a foreign worker. These groups of people were the best customers, because they always paid in dollars. Unlike local buyers, they paid in cash, whether for *short* or *long*. The *ekisiraani* or bad luck normally came from local buyers, who were always in short supply of cash. If you were lucky, they paid half the amount negotiated, or else they used you for a longer time, and then beat you up afterwards. Such men were really a cruel type.

Hamurungi spent the first days of her escape from home confined to Suzy's house. She had to first learn the secret ways of street life. The most important thing on the initiation list was to change her skin color.

"Good buyers like girls with very light skin. It looks as appealing as ripe oranges," Suzy intimated. The skin-lightening rituals included washing her body in a concentrated substance, made out of two or three bottles of JIK detergent, mixed with strong corrosive soaps. The other ritual was to smear the whole body with skin bleaching creams, mixed with strong whitening lotions. It was important for the person still undergoing this bleaching process to perform these rituals daily, or else the skin would fail to change color evenly. Most likely, the results would be like those of a half-cooked meal of *matooke*.

It was also important to collect large packs of color make up, because the buyers preferred different shades of color on the faces of their products. If you met an Asian, he most likely preferred green shade around the eyes. If it was a European, he usually wanted light make up, but with deep-red lipstick. With all those finished, a girl had to buy very large amounts of Vaseline, to keep oiling her legs smooth.

"If you are unfortunate enough to have hairs on the legs, then you would have to keep your sharp razorblade nearby. You must keep shaving off the unpleasant growth," Suzy said. The secret behind shiny legs was that they were good at reflecting light from the head lamps of vehicles. If a possible buyer approached a girl in his car, the first thing to attract him would be shimmering legs and thighs, tantalizingly peeping out of her miniskirt. It was an absolute convenience to wear short skirts, because they revealed enough to arouse the buyer's interest. And for cases of *short* treats, these skirts helped a girl to supply her goods to the buyer without much delay. For a girl who had a slight dislike for miniskirts, she found a convenient skirt with a small zipper fixed at the front and at the back. When a buyer came, she would be able to unzip the side of the skirt the buyer wanted to approach her from. The other very important thing was the size of the girl. She had to make sure that her figure kept a maximum flesh of about fifty kilograms.

"My friend, you have to keep a very slim figure. Some buyers, especially the whites, have said that the nearer to the bone, the sweeter," Suzy further explained.

Hamurungi took about three weeks to fully master the art of a street girl's life. She woke up every morning, boiled water from a *sigiri*, and poured it in a large basin. She then added the JIK mixture into the hot water, and proceeded to the small ramshackle shed which served as a bathroom. The shed was constructed using crooked wood planks, whose lower edges threatened to get uprooted from the soggy surface of the earth in which they stood. When she reached the shed, Hamurungi removed her thin *lesu* tied to the upper part of her breasts, and reached for her strong corrosive soap. She rubbed the soap vigorously on the sponge, which had a rough scratching surface. She dipped the sponge in the hot water, and lifted it to her face. She scrubbed and rubbed her face vigorously, until frothy foam formed on it. She rested the soap in a make-shift soap dish, made from a tin perforated with small holes at the bottom. She bent forward, cupped her hands, and gathered water from the basin. She splashed it over her face. She did this several times, before she started scrubbing the rest of her body with the rough sponge soaked with strong soap. After bathing, Hamurungi's whole body tingled with hot sensations caused by the strong brew of the JIK substances, and the strong chemical soap used in her bath. She then proceeded to smear herself with the mixture of skin bleaching creams and lotions, carefully kept in a large bottle. The large bottle occupied a permanent space on a small bedside stool. She started with her face, down to her shoulders, until she reached her feet. Her friend Suzy helped her smear the part of her back which her hands could not reach. At the end of the third week, Hamurungi's skin was as yellow as a ripe orange. Nobody could guess that she was the same girl who came to Suzy's house a few weeks back, with an even dark skin. Her cheeks were a bit overdone, and they looked like raw meat hanging up on a butcher's stall.

It was going to be Hamurungi's first night on the street. She felt little streaks of fear creep through her stomach, and she abruptly fell onto the bed. She had been leaning against the wall, exaggeratedly applying make-up to her face. Suzy was checking through her miniskirt collection for the most suitable color and design for the evening. When Hamurungi fell onto the bed unexpectedly, Suzy looked up with questioning eyes.

"I don't think I am going tonight," Hamurungi said. She then told Suzy about her fears. It was as if small butterflies were running up and down the insides of her stomach. Suzy laughed a small devilish laughter. What was she really afraid of?

"In this business, you go to make money against all fears. It is true the first night on the dark unfriendly streets is really frightening, but a girl has to toughen. If you allow feelings of any type to visit you, then you are soon out of business," Suzy replied. She told her that the business of night life needed someone with the toughest mind and the stoniest heart. She also told her of the terrible ordeal that one of their friends once suffered, when she landed on a crude Nigerian.

"But the man could have been any other tribe or nationality," Hamurungi said.

"No way, those people of West Africa have their own way of speaking English. For instance, if they want to say the word 'hurry', they always call it *horry* instead," Suzy explained. So when the Nigerian approached the girl, they negotiated and agreed on the amount. The man wanted her for a *long* treat at his house, and he showed her the tempting dollars peeping out of the pocket of his *agbada*. The girl immediately knew she had landed on a big harvest that night. She entered the man's Mercedes Benz car, and they drove away. When she reached the man's house, she found there a group of other men, including an elderly man of about sixty. The group spoke in very high pitched tone, and they were just completing a meal of yams served on a big silver platter. The man who had brought the girl told her to sit in the big sofa, placed in the left corner of the house. He sat in another corner, and lit a long cigar. He told one of the men to bring the girl some wine. The girl wondered whether the man had brought her for business, or for a tourist visit. Before she could have time to sort her thoughts out, the man who had been told to give her some wine planted himself in front of her. He stamped his left foot against her right foot, and squeezed her breasts. It happened too quickly for the girl to realize what it was all about. The group surrounded the girl, and started shouting obscenities at her.

"We are now in real business, baby," the man who had brought her said. The rest of the group now descended on her, and ripped her clothes off. They raped her in turns, until she passed out. They then threw her out of the house for dead. She could have died in the cold windy night, had it not been for the local defense guards who found her lying groaning on the veranda, in the early hours of the morning. They picked her up and took her to the Police clinic. The Police said there was no doctor in their clinic, and threw her limp body on their 999 vehicle for Mulago Hospital. They put her on the doorstep of emergency ward, and drove off. She was admitted to intensive care ward, and she stayed there for three days.

She did not have the money to pay for the bill, and she escaped from Mulago Hospital in the middle of the night. When she told her friends about her story, some girls feared and spent two days off the streets. However, the bite of poverty became too much for them to bear, and they returned to the streets the third day. So as Suzy was saying, the business required the toughest mind, and the stoniest heart. When Suzy finished her story, Hamurungi was too distraught to speak. What had she brought herself into? Supposing she met a similar fate, like that met by the girl who went for a *long* treat from the Nigerian? She turned her face sideways on the pillow, and started to cry. Tears freely flowed from eyes, and traced lines on her heavily made up face as they slid down to her chin. Suzy put her arms around her, and tried to comfort her. Such incidences were a nasty part of the business, and they happened to the girls during the days of misfortune.

Hamurungi soon got used to life on the street. She shifted from Bwaise slum area and joined her friend Suzy in Kisenyi. She woke up every morning and performed her ritual of bathing in hot water mixed with corrosive substances. After that, she started preparing breakfast. Her breakfast was made of fried cassava and dry tea. She drank this type of breakfast when her previous night's harvest on Speke Road was poor. She then took a morning nap on her straw mattress, covering herself with a *lesu*, which served as a pair of bed sheets and blanket. The morning nap was necessary for her to gain energy, because she was usually worn out after the night shift. Sometimes, she got a customer who was very insatiable. Such types of customers engaged girls in rough sex the whole night. In fact, many girls complained about such men, because these men usually failed to pay the whole amount for the *long* treat.

Hamurungi had now spent two months in the business. One night, she had just negotiated a *long* treat with a smart-looking customer, when she saw another girl approaching the spot where she stood with the man. The girl wore a short transparent skirt, from which peeped the *yellowiest* legs Hamurungi had ever seen. On looking closer, she saw that the girl had no underwear beneath the skirt. The fine contours of her body peered through her transparent skirt, including the unmistakable v-shape. When Hamurungi's customer saw the girl in the transparent skirt, he quickly beckoned to her.

"What is it, daddy?" the girl cooed. Hamurungi's customer gave the girl a pat on the back, and squeezed her breasts. Hamurungi sensed she could easily lose her customer to this new girl. Who was she? Why was she disobeying the unwritten rules of Speke Road night business? Each girl knew that whenever a customer was booked, there was no way another girl could tamper with the deal. Hamurungi decided to frighten the girl off her customer.

"What exactly do you think you are doing?" she asked.

"What of you?" the girl replied.

"Stop your rotten familiarity. I have already booked my guy!" Hamurungi became hostile. She was raising up her long painted nails to scratch the girl's face, when the customer interrupted. He told the two girls to behave themselves, if they both wanted some cash from him. The rivaling girl pulled the man sideways, and told him she had a special treat for him.

"Daddy, please have a taste of my candy," she said, pointing to the front side of her dress. As soon as the man heard this, he hugged the girl and took her to the upper side of Speke Road pavement. The girl squatted, and opened her legs wide. She pulled the man's right hand, and led it to her inner thighs. She told the man to push his middle finger in her private parts. The man did as he was told. The girl asked him how he felt about her, now that he had just had a small taste of her.

"I think you are the right size and temperature," the man replied. He then pulled the girl up, and the two entered his Mercedes Benz car. They drove off into the blaring night life of Kampala City.

Hamurungi could not forget how she lost a very promising customer to a cheeky and bony girl. Her friend Suzy told her that such girls usually came from Makerere University or Nakawa College of Business Studies, for business on the streets. Such girls were really dangerous, and the rest of the girls recognized them from the way they spoke. Their English was spoken with a heavy foreign accent, and they behaved like playful kittens.

Hamurungi had now gotten used to the business of street life. After one year on the streets, she became a smart and steady character. She no longer needed to pester Kimira to build her the promised house in Kololo. With her new confident stance, she hoped to land on the good luck of a *muzungu*, or a moneyed foreign worker. And that would be a definite dollar deal! She had learnt the tricks of hooking customers, even the most reluctant of the lot. Once such customers approached Speke Road, flashing the lights of their posh cars in the faces of the girls, the latter were quick to plant themselves in front of the vehicles, back and legs facing the flashing lights of the vehicles.

"No man in his right senses can afford to miss out on the secrets of the fleshy appealingly yellow legs," Suzy always remarked, each time she managed to get a new buyer. Hamurungi had taken Suzy's advice to the letter, and she made sure she followed the routine of lightening her whole skin with the usual corrosive detergents and chemicals. She dated and slept with hundreds of men, just in one year of business. The most interesting was when she landed on a big shot, who she later discovered to be a Cabinet Minister. The man told her that they would sleep in a small quiet hotel in the outskirts of the city. As soon as he concluded the deal with her, his cell phone rang. He spoke to someone whom Hamurungi did not of course know, but from his tone of voice, she could sense that the Minister was a bit perturbed. As soon as he finished talking, he switched off the phone set. He then told Hamurungi he had changed his mind about an out-of-town hotel. They would sleep in a bigger and more luxurious hotel—the Sheraton.

True to his word, the Minister booked Hamurungi in Sheraton Hotel. He directed her to ask for third floor, and gave her a condition. While she was at his service, she must under no circumstance communicate to the rest of her friends on the street. She must not let the hotel staff know he was visiting her room, because lowly people like hotel workers were well known for their long ears and loose tongues. Hamurungi was only too happy to work according to the orders of the Minister.

Before she left her house that evening, she intimated to Suzy that she had a rare deal with a high profile man from government. She was under the obligation not to reveal the name of the big shot. She would perhaps give her the details when she returned. Suzy was happy for her friend, who now had the luck of sharing the big dollars from a rich government official.

"Perhaps I may pull a similar string of luck this evening," Suzy said, as she dabbed red rouge on her cheeks. The two girls went out, and headed for the taxi park. Hamurungi waved at a special hire taxi, and instructed the driver to take them to the Sheraton.

"Pass Speke Road, drop my friend there, and get me at the Sheraton," she said. As the taxi sped off, the two girls giggled cheekily at the prospects ahead. Soon, Hamurungi reached her destination. She pulled two thousand shillings from her pocket and paid the driver. She went directly to reception, and faced a young woman at the counter.

"I wish to have the keys to floor number 3," Hamurungi started.

"Oh, my! There is no key for floor three!" the receptionist answered. She told Hamurungi that she could not be helped, unless she knew the exact room number she was going to, on floor three.

"What exactly do you mean? Who do you think you are, huh? A mere lick of dishes, *mukomba bokisi!* You thrive on the generosity of people like the big shot himself, who just booked me in for a week!" Hamurungi threw the words at the receptionist, while heaving like a charging bull.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am. I didn't realize that it was you the honorable Minister booked in. I sincerely thought it was his wife, Madame Veronica. Please..."

"People like you are better off kept at home, drinking *tonto* in the village bars. If you don't watch out, you will soon lose your job," Hamurungi threatened. The receptionist was obviously embarrassed, not because she thought she offended Hamurungi, but because she personally knew Veronica, the Minister's wife. And from the way she was dressed, the girl Veronica's husband just booked in was a common prostitute from Speke Road. Her type of skin, gone a dead yellow with corrosive bleaching, was also a major characteristic of the night girls. Of recent, the hotel authorities had started chasing girls of Hamurungi's type from the building. These girls had become a menace to guests, and were wont to be found lazing in the corridors and the gardens in their short revealing skirts, waiting for possible customers. It was after some foreign guests had complained of the girls' behavior, which ranged from petty theft to complete robbery of the guests' possessions, that the hotel administration started hounding them out. And to think that a member of the loathsome group of prostitutes now turned into a lecturing loud mouth!

As the receptionist looked at Hamurungi's heavily made-up face, she realized that the types of Hamurungi presented nothing but a contradiction in her mind. It was true that most foreign guests entertained call girls in their rooms, but that was when the arrangement was made through a brothel agency.

This type of booking was strictly private, because prostitution was outlawed in the country, and there was actually a specific paragraph about it in the penal code. That was as far as the law on paper was concerned. As for the real practice, the sale of human flesh was actually a thriving business, and matters had not improved, with the supposed keepers of the law like the honorable Minister promoting the business. What a rotten contradiction! she thought, as she relieved Hamurungi of her small bag. She signaled to a page clad in a red hood and cap. The page came to the reception desk with brisk steps. He bent forward and bowed, before he stood on the side of the reception desk, straight like a telephone mast.

"Please take the young lady to her room. Floor three, room S.24," the receptionist said, handing Hamurungi's bag to the page. The two went by an elevator to floor three, and all through the ascent, there was a chilling silence between page and guest. Soon, the elevator reached its destination, and Hamurungi was relieved to get rid of the imposing figure of the page. Her mind was focused on the first night with the big shot. She did not hear the page's rehearsed goodbye. When she reached her room, she fell onto the large inviting bed and looked up at the ceiling.

Hamurungi looked outside her window to get a better the view of the hotel surroundings at night. Bright bulb lamps threw their yellow and white beams against the black curtain of the night. She opened the window to let in the fresh breeze of the night. She breathed in the cool and fresh scent of the night rose flower, which must have been in bloom somewhere in the hotel gardens. She wished her big shot could bring her a bouquet of the tempting flowers, so that she could smell their tantalizing aroma.

Wake up, Ham, you are becoming sentimental! You came here to make money, not to dream of silly impossible treats! You lost your sense of romance the time you walked out on your parents, to join the street business in the city! Now what nonsense are you trying to deceive yourself with? She was still tussling with the conflict inside her head, when there was a soft knock on the door. She listened to ascertain it was a knock, but it was not repeated for some seconds. She knew that although awake, she must have been dreaming so early in the night. She was about to settle on the settee nestled in the corner of the room, when she heard the sound of the soft knock again.

"That must be the rude receptionist coming to apologize! *Ho-ho*, she's finished!" She would show her how unlucky she was, to forever sit behind that dreadful desk, with nobody to give her precious dollars, like the ones she would soon get. She straightened herself, looked at her face in the mirror, and stood arms akimbo.

"Come in!" she shouted. The doorknob was turned slowly, and the honorable Minister emerged through the now open door. Hamurungi was beside herself with shame when she saw the big shot himself standing in the doorway. He was too shocked to utter a word.

"Hello Minister, I couldn't guess it was you," she said, trying to cover up. The Minister did not answer immediately. Instead, he took a few steps forward, and faced her directly. He addressed her with clenched teeth.

"You silly little girl. Your stupid brain has already forgotten what I told you to do?" he replied, holding her by the right arm. He twisted it and wrung it mercilessly. Hamurungi cried out, and the Minister put his large hand over her mouth.

"I told you to keep that door locked, and each knock was first to be ascertained by you. What did you do, instead? Just left it unlocked, and looked on like a fool! Supposing it was Madame Veronica at the door? Then all my reputation would go to the dogs, merely because of your foolish mind? Go lock the door now!" He said, giving her a hard slap across the right cheek. Hamurungi felt great pain, but she knew better than cry out even the faintest cry. She did not have to ask the Minister who Madame Veronica was, for she already knew that was the name of his wife. Supposing she had really been the one at the door? By the receptionist's remarks, that ignoble fool, Hamurungi had already gathered that the couple regularly slept in room S. 24 on particular occasions. The hotel staff had come to regard the Minister's booking with his wife as a matter of fact. That was why the receptionist looked at Hamurungi with shock, when the latter mentioned having been booked in by the big shot. However, all that was now inconsequential. Hamurungi was on a mission, if not to harvest dollars, from the big shot, at least to show him her gifts of flesh. Even if she went back with little or no dollar harvest, because the customer was in fact in a bad mood, she would ensure she showed off her well-shaped figure and yellow thighs. Goods advertised are sooner sold than rejected, she reasoned. After all, business without advertising was like winking at someone in the dark. Maybe what the Minister needed was just that cheeky wink, thrown at him right in the face, as he stood there brooding over God-knows how many wars the government army now waged in a foreign country. She walked slowly to the door, and turned the key in the lock.

End of Part One

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosemary Kyarimpa is a Ugandan-born Writer and Winner of the First Prize in Short Stories, National Book Trust of Uganda (2000). With a rich International experience and strong academic background, the author is a committed woman activist and human rights crusader. She has published two Short Story Books, in addition to contributing articles and academic papers to several International Journals. Her third book, a collection of feminist poetry, is lined up for the next literary project. Recently, Ms Kyarimpa expanded her writing talents into filmmaking, at the prestigious Boston University (USA).

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