

WELCOME TO 'HEAVEN'

by

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“No, no more blood!” she begged, writhing on the mattress. “No more, let me go!” Her red hair was matted with the heavy sweat of three days and nights.

Abu walked away. When he heard grunting and snuffling he began knocking the containers together, whistling and screeching. Baboons were nasty, vicious beasts. They'd attack if surprised but usually fled if approached with enough ceremony. He could hear them moving away through the bush.

Seeing the last callused bottom disappear into the low-hanging branches Abu laughed, “Afraid of me. I kill you next time!”

He removed the long stick that held the heavy well cover in place and slid it aside. While lowering the bucket he hooted into the deep stone cavern, the

echoed sound pleasing him. He jiggled the thick rope so the bucket fell over on its side when it hit the water and began filling.

With jerry-can filled and well carefully covered Abu walked back across the warm sand. He could see the Indian Ocean was beginning to refill the lagoon. The barge would be floating soon. He carried the water up two steps onto the rough planks of the area that served as entry way and porch.

“Who are you?” came the weak, frightened voice.

“Abu.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Wallie say watch you. I watch.”

She nodded, “Jambo Abu.” She was leaning against the doorway, sweating, wracked by trembling and fever, then chills. Turning, she groped her way back to the mattress on the floor of the saloon and collapsed.

Abu walked through, taking the water to the kitchen. He got fire going in the cook stove, filled the kettle and began searching for food.

“Abu,” Scarlet called, “is there water?”

“Can’t drink. First must boil.” He went in, stood looking at her. He’d never seen anyone with green eyes before. Had he been younger, he would have been frightened.

“I’m so thirsty. There are some bottles of beer behind the bar. Will you see if there’s coke or something? I assume this is malaria, right?”

Abu nodded. Muzungu were weak, everyone knew that. Their skin turned red with just a little sun, most got sick in boats, and they complained about everything. He'd had malaria many times, everybody did. He shrugged, turned to the search for coke, a rare treat.

Scarlet groaned, "The nightmares! And my head is killing me. Can't believe I left the Paludrin at the hotel in Lamu. 'Kenya is great,' my aunt told me, 'but be sure to take one daily or you'll hate yourself.' Too right."

"Coke!" Abu beamed. "Plenty!"

Scarlet smiled weakly. "Can you open one for me, one for you?"

Proudly he presented the bottle. She gulped desperately, ignoring his, "No good, too fast." Immediately she lurched to the outside edge of the mattress and threw up into the sea.

She finally subsided into dry heaves and settled into the kangas and pillows, clutching her head and whimpering.

Abu sipped his coke and watched, fascinated by her. When she began trembling he placed more kangas on her. After she fell asleep he lay down on the cushions across from her. He didn't get too close for he wasn't sure he trusted her.

When he awoke Scarlet was looking at him. She handed him a coke and opened one for herself. "This one I'll sip," she smiled.

Abu took a long drink. "Tide is in, we float. Maybe Wallie come soon."

"You come here often?"

“Sometimes. Wallie pays my father to work. I help,” he said proudly.

“My aunt sent me here because I was so frustrated with university. She was pushy, but I’m glad. Kenya is something, but this coast is the real treasure.” She lay back, tired. “And this barge, in the middle of nowhere, is paradise.”

“You want food?” Abu hadn’t understood her words but was doing what his mother would do for him or one of his many brothers and sisters.

“Good idea,” she smiled. While he was in the kitchen she slid into the warm water. It was only about three feet deep but the twenty by forty foot barge floated on its base of empty oil drums. Its house, like the one in which Abu lived in his village, was of woven makuti thatch. Soft kangas of many bright colors and intricate patterns hung as curtains in all the doorways and were strewn about the place, rainbows in disarray.

Hearing an outboard, she climbed out of the water. She tied a kanga above her breasts and with another began drying her hair. The hot equatorial sun felt great but she began trembling and sat down, too dizzy to move.

“Wallie!” Abu announced. He shoved a bowl of warm beans and a handful of crackers at her and ran to the side, dove in and swam toward a break in the mangroves.

“How long has it been?” Scarlet whispered, shaking her head. “I’ve approached death, and without Father to look after me. I feel so much older.”

“Wallie emerged from the mangroves in his dhow, ‘Mzuri’. He slowed to let Abu scramble aboard. As they pulled up to the side of the barge both were beaming, their camaraderie evident.

“Jambo Bwana,” Scarlet smiled.

Wallie stepped onto the barge, his blue eyes all compassion. “Poor little Yank! Abu tells me you’ve been down with malaria. You do look pale,” he gave her a quick hug.

“I’m the dumb muzungu who forgot her pills.”

Laughing, he reached for his backpack. “I moved down from London ten years ago and still get it occasionally. Take four of these Serviquin as soon as you can keep them down. You’ll be fine. Sorry I was gone so long, ran into some problems.” She didn’t see the change in his face as he turned away and began helping Abu unload ‘Mzuri’.

Sunset had left a pale amber glow and gentler warmth by the time Wallie woke her. “How are you?”

“Ravenous,” she smiled.

“Try this snapper I caught on the way up. Abu and I have already eaten. He cooked the rice and has gone to bed.”

“Thanks!” She dove in. “Delicious!” she managed when she finally took a break “Abu would scold me, I’d better slow down.”

He laughed and handed her a Coke.

“Wallie, I love this place. I can see why my aunt was so enthusiastic. She can send lots of people through her travel agency if you’re interested. Hers are the ‘seen it, done it’ type, looking for just this kind of rough/exquisite hide-away. They’ll fly from the States to London then Nairobi. A night there, then a small plane to Manda Island and you pick them up in your traditional dhow, ‘Mzuri’. Ten days here, snorkeling, deep-sea fishing, hanging-out. . .”

“Your enthusiasm is wonderful, Scarlet,” Wallie interrupted, smiling sadly. He sat down beside her, “Look at those stars. They’re almost touchable. This is my favorite place in the world. Listen to the night.”

They sat, wrapped in animal music punctuated by waves breaking gently on the reef that protected the idyllic lagoon.

“I’m not going back,” Scarlet declared. Africa is where I want to be. I’ll help them open up that school they were talking about in Lamu. Then maybe I can teach while working on my photography. My aunt really wants to get business going in Africa so I can do research, then be her coordinator.”

“What about your dad?”

She took a deep breath. “Virtually everything I’ve done has been for him. My mother died birthing me, so I’ve blamed myself for him being alone. But, I’m beginning to resent him. He doesn’t deserve that. Realizing I was alone to face the malaria terrified me. I must become better equipped for looking after myself. It’s better for us both if I make the move.”

Wallie put his arm around her. “Big decision.”

“I’ve found a place with a niche I can fill while fulfilling my own needs. It clicked when Abu studied while I studied him. We both felt a touch superior, afraid but attracted, interested.”

She turned to look at him. “So, do I send my aunt your acceptance of charter contract on your hunk of Nirvana?”

Wallie laughed. “What a hustler! It’s not that simple.” He got up to get a beer, handed her another coke. “For rehydration,” he smiled.

“I’ve been so wrapped up in me. . .what’s wrong Wallie?”

“Well, after dropping you here I went to Nairobi. One of the government heavy-weights is trying to claim all seafront property as ‘nature reserve’. Sounds good, but it’s actually just to garner more tax from muzungu with houses, hotels and boats. The thinking is that anyone with white skin, even the ones born here, have lots of money. He’s forced one small resort north of here to sell out to him cheap and is now eyeing this section. To stay here I’ll need to pay a five year tax now, then pay yearly. It’s not that expensive, but I just don’t have it. And, this barge needs a basic rebuild. She couldn’t take the strain of being towed elsewhere. It’s seeming impossible, but I’ll burn her before I let that bastard have her.”

“But, I thought you had a good business with your deep-sea fishing boat. Especially with the tournament coming up.”

“That’s the problem. Just had to give the boat a complete overhaul. She should be afloat in a week. But then I’ll need to really hustle during off-season

to recoup cash. I won't have time to get this place up to charter readiness. Vicious circle."

"I've an idea, but need to sleep. Let's talk tomorrow." She lay down. "Umm, Wallie, would you mind curling up here with me? I really need to be cuddled."

"Well now, that's a request I can't refuse."

She awoke to the smell of coffee and toast, the sun warm on her body. "I did die, this is Heaven. Blessed be the God of mosquitoes."

Wallie laughed from the kitchen. "Breakfast in ten minutes, m' Lady."

Scarlet rolled off the mattress, over the side into the shallow water. Bath temperature. With lazy strokes she swam around the barge. When she climbed out she was laughing. "Oh, Wallie, you can't give this up!"

He handed her a cup hot, sweet limes tea. "No coffee yet, three more pills and lots of toast. Abu's gone fishing. We'll head for Lamu this afternoon when the water's high enough to get through the mangroves."

"Listen, this is my idea," she began excitedly. "You draw up an outline of the overhead for getting 'Heaven' ready for charter." Wallie smiled at the name she had given the barge.

Not noticing, she continued, "We've got three months before folks will want to flock down. Figure in the new tax, any costs. Then, an average of food costs, liquor, extra help like a cook, extra snorkel and fishing gear. Oh, and for deep-sea fishing. 'Heaven' will sleep eight so you'll never want more than six at a time. Figure in your cut. We can fax it to my aunt from the hotel in Lamu. Her

business is thriving. I know she'll invest, she can make it back through the charters."

"Slow down!" Wallie laughed. "You are certainly your aunt's niece. She tried to buy it the minute she saw it last year. I tell you what, you fax her when we get to the hotel, feel her out. Then I'll work up an estimate. But, you must realize you'll need to be here a lot. I won't have time to get her ready and certainly can't run the charters alone."

She threw her arms around his neck, giggling like a child. "I can't think of anything in this world that would make me happier!"

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Wallie shook the water from his long blonde hair and leaned back against the rough planks of the barge steps. He was panting from the exertion of his anger-burning swim. "Well at least you and your aunt let me make enough in the six months chartering so that I can start over."

"No, Wallie!" Scarlet's proud dancer's posture had dissolved, her demeanor resembling that of a ragdoll. "You can't believe that! I knew nothing of her plans. I was a fool. . .she used me."

He growled, spit. "Tanzania is just opening up to tourists. Between fishing and safaris I'll do well there. Fuck all of you!"

"I tell you I didn't know!" she yelled, tears streaming down her cheeks. She stepped down into the water in front of him. "She lied to me," she stated flatly.

He stared at her, closed his eyes and his shoulders slumped. “No, I know you didn’t,” he sighed. “Her deal with that crooked government buffoon means she’ll get ‘Heaven’ as well as use of the lagoon.” He gave a bitter laugh, “She got what she wanted as well as revenge.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your aunt’s first trip down, I had her. She was just another one passing through. First one I’d brought up here though. Yeah, she wanted to buy it. I laughed, underestimated her.” He shrugged, “I didn’t answer her letters. The last one was nasty.”

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this?” Scarlet’s emerald eyes flashed, her anger rising above the hurt.

“That was a year before you arrived.” His eyes softened as he looked at her. He cradled her face in his hands. “Because she, just like all those before you, was nothing but temporary entertainment.”

Scarlet laughed, grabbed him, and they rolled into the water. “I knew you were absolutely besotted with me,” she spluttered. “It took you long enough to realize!”

He gave her no chance to say more until they lay naked and satiated. “So, what’s the plan?” she asked as she reached for her kanga.

“You’ll need to pack quickly,” he said as he dressed. “We’ve got to beat the tide out. Abu’s put all my stuff in ‘Mzuri’. He’s coming with me, with his father’s blessings.”

Scarlet leapt up. "I'll only be a minute." Then, as if it were just sinking in, "Starting fresh in Tanzania. Oh, we will be a great team."

Wallie and Scarlet looked straight ahead as they maneuvered 'Mzuri' out through the mangroves. Abu kept looking back at the barge as the flames consumed its dry thatch hungrily. He shook his head. Perhaps he would never understand the muzungu.

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