

Caine Prize Stories 2009:
Shortlist

You Wreck Her

Parselelo Kantai

YOU DO NOT KNOW how far you have fallen down in this world until you see yourself crawling up a *karao's* face on a Friday night. You are slobbering and gagging over your short-time, ignoring the after-taste of condom coming into your nostrils from the back of your throat, like Goort's coffee bubbling in the machine on a Sunday morning a long time ago. You lather and stroke. Your head bobs like a bar of soap in bathwater. You can feel he is getting close. There is a commotion far away, beyond the squeak of rubber screaming in your ears, and your short-time is fumbling around you like he lost something important in your pubic hair. He finds your breast. He is clutching you like a handbag thief on Moi Avenue. His thing grows larger in your mouth, then trembles and the thing in your mouth grows soft and your jaws are aching and there is a tap on the window. And right there, on the uniformed policeman's face you see yourself.

The clock dial on the dashboard of the Land Rover Discovery says it is 2.35am. This car park is empty, save for the junkery and wreckage of old government vehicles – the lorries sitting on stones because nobody could find a spare part for the alternator. The grey shells of military Land Rovers with hibiscuses and bougainvilleas growing in them because they have not been moved since the attempted coup in 1982. Up Harry Thuku Road is the Central Police Station, which is right now bursting with street-girls like yourself unlucky enough to have been caught tonight. They will do what you have just done *and* pay the policemen for it. Across the road is the Norfolk Hotel, where you have just been with the *mzungu*, where your eyes met across the Delamere Terrace. In the old days *mzungus* used to shoot Africans passing by for sport from the Delamere Terrace.

Now you suck on their penises for 500 shillings per half hour. The fruits of independence came in strange ways.

This is the short-time car park. It is guarded by the police.

In the dimness, the *karao* looks like a phone booth with a moustache. He glistens like he has just been dipped in oil. The light bounces off his dark face, his cap low so that the whites of his eyes startle you when you see them. He is wearing one of those luminous green police coats and he is looking straight at you, making you

cover your breasts with your hands.

The *mzungu* rolls down his window a little way. He had switched on the radio. It blares news of a war in a place with an unpronounceable name. The *mzungu* told you he liked to listen to the BBC, “during”. He had said it with a shy smile. His voice was that of a boy, his face with the rabbit’s teeth and the beaky nose and the bushy eyebrows over eyes that learned somewhere long ago that the best way to look straight at a man is to squint, his face was that of a man of this world. And world news turns him on.

“Terribly sorry, officer. I’m afraid we got rather carried away.” The *mzungu*’s voice is imported from England, cough syrup and charcoal crackling – a half-laugh that sounds like a wheeze. You want to giggle. His trousers are around his ankles, his shirt halfway up his belly. He still has his jacket and tie on and he says “carried away” like it was a boardroom meeting that got a little heated. He gropes in the dark looking for something in his trouser pockets. In the dimness you make out his wallet. He picks out two notes and passes them through the crack in the window without looking.

He is not prepared for the gunshot.

The bullet goes in through the driver’s window and out through yours. You hear the gunshot from one side and the ping and spark of metal on the rusted rim of the Nissan Urvan parked next to you. One moment you are behind the safety of tinted windows and in a blink you are covered in glass. You are relieved to find that you are not hurt.

You are not sure whether the voice with a hoarse scream is yours saying shut up, shut up, but you can make out the charcoal-syrup voice of a man who only hears about violence on the radio and is saying what the fuck, what the fuck in university English.

It is a mistake to argue with a man with a gun. It is a mistake to listen to the bubble and knot of your small intestines, the rise of panic in your throat forcing you to say without thinking do you know who I am, do you know who I am, you can’t touch me. It is a mistake to pull out your passport from your jacket and hold it up as if it is a weapon. And to keep saying over and over again, do you know what this, is as if a piece of paper can be your shield and defender at a time like this. To keep saying “Di-plo-ma-tic I-mmu-ni-ty” as if you are a schoolteacher in a village class and the children want to share those words with you like roast kidney and *ugali* on Easter Sunday. It is a mistake that ignorant white men in Africa cannot hear often enough.

“How old are you, sir?” asks the *karao*, as if it is very important that he knows. The barrel of his pistol rests against the *mzungu*’s head. The *karao* has a torch in his other hand. His head is halfway inside the car, close enough for you and the

mzungu to smell the smoky aroma of a recent cigarette on his breath. You find that you are staring into the *karao's* moustache and the torchlight is almost blinding. So you get cross-eyed from the staring and find yourself back in your father's house. He is sitting in his old chair, pulling off his shoes and you are a little girl standing before him with his dinner, waiting and silent and wondering whether the food sometimes gets trapped in his moustache.

The light moves from your face and you can finally exhale. You find yourself travelling with the light, down your face, your breasts and stomach, so yellow and blotched and bloated that they feel like they belong to somebody else. The light circles your groin, licks your thighs. It rests briefly on your g-string on the floor next to a bunch of tissues, the torn condom wrapping. It pans across the leather seats, the music system, the dashboard with its wood panelling. You spot your earring in the gear-stick pouch, the one you bought that Tuesday at Maasai Market when you went shopping for your new life with Goort. The stall woman was charging 800 bob for it and you brought her down to 400 or you would move with your *mzungu* tourist to another stall, you were so confident then. And now your earring is trapped in the gear-stick pouch. It is making a bulge, making you think of lip-plates and those women in one of Goort's coffee table books on African beauty.

"How old are you, sir?"

"None of your business. I have diplomatic immunity!"

You have travelled with the torchlight to the *mzungu's* thing. You are a spectator peering into the wreckage of a bus accident. The scene has been evacuated. The thing lies lifeless beneath the mountain of his belly. You watch the condom sliding off. It falls silently between the *mzungu's* legs. You notice idly how white his legs are, like something on an X-ray sheet. The *karao* does not shift the light of the torch even when the condom begins to ooze, even when a slow trickle of fluid begins making its way towards the *mzungu's* buttocks.

All you hear is that the *mzungu* has fallen silent. Then there is the sound of another trickle when you hear a click from the pistol and the *mzungu* starts babbling again.

"How-old-are-you-sir?" The *karao* emphasizes every word.

"I... 45 years old." He falls back into the leather and runs a hand through his hair.

The torchlight stops moving.

"How old are you?" He is talking to you.

"Sixteen," you say automatically.

He shines the torch in your face again. He laughs for the first time, a dry, heaving sound.

“*Sitaulisa tena.*” His Kiswahili sounds like it was manufactured in your village, but it doesn’t hide the threat. “I won’t ask you again.”

The *mzungu* glances at you quickly, curiously. He was telling you before at the Delamere Terrace what he liked doing with little girls. You said 2,000 bob for short-time, 5,000 for the night. The love left his eyes and he said for a girl like you, nothing more than 500. You said okay, you knew a place.

“*Ishirini na sita,*” you find yourself saying. Your teeth are chattering. You think it’s from the cold coming through the windows. You are 26 years old, past your ‘sell by’ date, Goort had said. You laughed with him. *Je pons kill fo ko tu ai.* You thought it was a birthday joke.

By this time other *karaos* would have already walked away, a thousand bob richer, two if they talked nicely. They would have peered in on the scene, gently tapped on the window and stretched out a hand. The man in the car with the trousers around his ankles would have cough-laughed. His fingers would pick out some notes, pass them through the half-opened window. The *karao* would walk away, nodding vigorously, his eyes agreeing with the stupid grin playing on his mouth like a JamboAfrica band at a tourist hotel. But the way this one looked at you! And he didn’t know you had seen him watching as you mouthed off the *mzungu*. He had a look of an insect that had burrowed itself underneath his skin and was crawling up his face, and you, not the *mzungu* with the thing the size of a flea-bite, you were that insect.

That is why you know somebody is going to die.

“When you get out of Kamiti prison you will be 60 years old, sir.”

You can feel the rumble of panic rising from the *mzungu*.

“There is no diplomatic immunity for child molesters in Kenya.”

And even now the *karao* has not blown your cover. You are 16 again.

You are 16 and out on the town. Friday night on Koinange Street in downtown Nairobi and all you can see are red lights of cars soundlessly gliding, windows tinted. *Malayas* with handkerchiefs for skirts, ostriches in heels clattering after red lights – tail-lights, brake-lights – and up and down the street the calls of “*Hanee! Hanee!*” will echo in the darkness until it becomes grey and the sounds of other birds take over.

You have been here among the ostriches for two weeks, maybe less, and every night you learn how there is nothing new under the sun. They cackle and blow smoke in your face when you speak of a lost and painful childhood where you became your mother after she died, washing and cleaning and carrying the house during the day and carrying the weight of your father between your legs at night because he said you were now old enough to carry the family flag. They tell you

to save it; everybody has a copy of that story. You can sell it for an extra 500 bob to a sad man in the short-time car park. They tell you that you in particular need every little extra that you can get. That you are too tall, too skinny and too dark, you don't stand a chance against a long line of short, plump and brown ostriches. They tell you to soak in Jik, to use Ambi and Oil of Ulay or those little tablets from China that the Congolese girls like because in two weeks the men will be asking if your father was a German tourist. They call you Marabou. They say it is because you are tall and skinny and dark. That all you can expect from the street is garbage, like the Marabou Stork.

And it is true. You only get lucky towards the end of the night, when the good girls have gone off with the men in the soundless cars and the prices have dropped. You become a specialist in sad men with straggly beards and creaky cars that smell of sleep, sweaty socks and half-smoked cigarettes.

During the day, you live in a hole in the wall just off Kirinyaga Road, among the refugees and illegals – the Congolese, Rwandese and others; some Beninois who can never fully explain how and why they came halfway across a continent to idle around and plait each other's hair and cook pounded banana and cassava in three different peppery sauces. But you like them, these people who talk about Brussels as if it is their village. And when you ask them who has ever been there they do something complicated with their mouths, roll their eyes and turn away. They say, with their mouths drooping and their wrists limp and their palms asking a question, you are Kenyan girl, you know notin'.

They tell you how much you will have to save to buy the Chinese pills, and you despair.

But Lingala is music to your ears. An endless succession of Franco and Kofi Olomide and Wenge Musica streamed through tinny cassette players at all hours of day and night. You want to know what "Bolingó" means, or "Motema na ngai." On the stairs at the entrance of the tenement where everybody sits around after lunch talking about nothing in particular because they are really listening to the music and waiting for the night, you learn how to move your waist and your inner-thigh muscles while holding your shoulders completely still, your face communicating that you are appalled at what your buttocks are doing. And everyone rolls about and laughs until they are crying and saying "Marabou, Kenyan girl, *arrêt, arrêt, s'il vous plaît!* You kill os! You know notin', notin' at all!"

You grasp at a French that floats along the dim, narrow corridors of the tenement, snatch the last ends of sentences bouncing against your plywood partition. You learn it the way people learn songs from radios playing in the upstairs room. *Je pons kill fo ko tu ai.* And always you will hear those words and see

men leaving, tucking in their shirts and doing their belt-buckles in the corridor, and a formidable Congolese woman standing by a door, a flowery lessu tucked under her armpits, looking ready for war if he dared show his face here again.

“It means, ah tink you should get di fok out,” somebody tells you one day after you have heard it a million times and don’t care that you will look stupid if you ask. Then you meet Goort.

Stop, your Rwandese friend who is almost your height and yellow like a mango in season, has told you no work, tonight we go party like regular people. She likes you, she says, because of the way you refused to laugh when she told you the story of her name. She tells the story as if she is still annoyed by the whole business, that she is the eighth child in her family and when her mother was in labour having her, she screamed “Stop!” in English and so loudly that her father heard her from the village bar a kilometre away. Stop must have also heard because it took her a day and a half to make her way down the birth canal. It was only then that her father, who did not understand English and her mother, who did not speak the language either and is still puzzled where the word came from, it was only then that they knew that this was to be their last child.

You have put on jeans and a t-shirt and a New York Knicks basketball cap that you bought for 50 shillings on the street. You are at Madhouse discotheque on Koinange Street with all the ostriches who have made the step up from chasing red lights on the street downstairs. You have been told but you have never seen that this work of yours is a ladder. The street ostriches all want to climb up the stairs to Madhouse and the ostriches already up the stairs want to dance into a *mzungu’s* life because a *mzungu* has wings that will carry you over the hills and far away to Europe.

Stop is at the counter buying another round of cold Pilsners and a second packet of Sweet Menthols because you already have your habit of smoking too much when you drink. You are alone at the table, so intent on the two ostriches in the middle of the dance-floor flicking each other with their tongues that you do not even sense that there is a man staring at you. It is only when the ostriches slowly turn away from their kiss and start watching you that you come back to yourself and see him. He has an eye patch over his left eye and is supporting himself with a crutch. He is wearing a bush green jacket, a black shirt and trousers that cannot possibly be purple; it must be the disco lights. You see that his hair flops over his ears and that if he wasn’t so bent and angry, he would look exactly like one of those cute little dogs in the foreign magazines. You also see that he was young a long time ago.

That is how you were discovered. It was only years later that it occurred to you that Stop never returned from the counter with the Pilsners and cigarettes,

but by that time you were a different person, surrounded by flashing cameras and fashion journalists in New York and London and Paris and Milan. What you remember from that night, as clearly as if it were yesterday, was Goort exclaiming over and over, "You wreck her! You wreck her!"

You became in a very short time a new person. Goort made arrangements for you to obtain a new wardrobe and a new identity. He was not in favour of your New York Knicks basketball cap and your jeans and t-shirt. He said you needed to look more African. So you went with him to the Maasai Market on a Tuesday afternoon and bought an armful of jewellery and the red and blue wraps and shawls, the *shukas* that made you so famous. You were surprised when at his house in Runda where he was boasting that one of his neighbours was a Cabinet Minister and another a European ambassador, he whipped out his bush-knife and began ripping up the *shukas*, because what was the point of buying new things only to destroy them. You were not happy when he told you to strip down to nothing and to put on the torn *shukas*. Or when he gave you a rusty old rifle and told you to stand under a tree and next to an old Mercedes whose tyres had been replaced with stones so that he could take an endless round of photographs. This is why in those early photographs of yourself in the fashion magazines, you are looking as if your mother has just died in a war-torn country.

You were surprised when at the point of his crisis that first time you made love Goort called you my Sudanese girl. You told him you were not Sudanese but he said not to worry, that people can be whatever they want to be. He told you that Sudan was 'hot' at the moment and that if you behaved yourself you could be the new Alek Wek. He laughed when you asked him what Alek Wek was.

"Not vaat darleenk, who. Alek Vek is very famous African model in Europe and America. You are beautiful like her." Then he kissed you very gently at the exact moment that you understood that you were in love for the first time, he kissed you on the forehead and said: "You can *be* her."

Goort told you that he used to be a soldier of fortune.

"I shoot ze war in Congo, ze war in Sudan Sud, even ze genocide in Rwanda. After I take ze pictures, I sell to ze one who pay ze most. Zere are so many magazines in Europe that vant zis kind of image. I am, how you say, a soldier of fortune." It was from all those places that he collected the old guns. He put them in a cabinet in his sitting room. "But it is oggly beezness, very oggly. So much blood. Ze African he slaughters ze ozzer African. Like, like les animaux, ze animal. And to take zese pictures, it is to spread ze sadness, ze oggliness in the world. So I go back 'ome to Brussels and tink what I am going to do. But I love Africa. It is in ze blood. So I must return."

Then another night when you had exhausted each other in his bed and he was smoking a triumphant cigarette, he told you how he had discovered his life's mission after his motorcycle accident in the streets of Brussels, how he would change himself and bring beauty to the world.

"Ven I am lying in ze hospital vizout ze leg, vizout ze eye, I say to myself zere iz no drama in motorcycle accident in Brussels so how I give myself ze drama. So I tink zat if I say zat I stepped on a landmine in eastern Congo, zen zere is ze drama in zat. And I tink again zat now I must come back to Africa looking for ze African beauty. How it can be so easy to put ze drama in ze beauty because in Europe zere is no drama any more. It is all pouff!" And he made that complicated expression of the illegals on Kirinyaga Road, of rolling his eyes and blowing out his cheeks.

"So I come back and for tree months, *rien*, nothing. Every night I am going out and ze girls, zey look like, how you say, ostrich. Zey have tin legs, very tin. And zey veer high heels, and lipstick and zey are yellow, not dark like true African woman. Not like you." And he kissed you on the forehead and stared lovingly into your eyes.

"So zat night when I see you in ze disco I say to myself, 'You wreck her!' *Mais oui*. I have found it."

Goort was alarmed by your second-hand knowledge of Brussels, about how you talked about the market in Matongé, which he insisted was called Ixelles, with the smells of frying fish and roasted cassava and Congolese music in the air, and about "Le Manneken-Pis," the silly little boy who urinates in public near Le Grand Place. He said we can't have you talking about that, you must remember that you are a child soldier from Sudan whom I discovered resting under a tree in Yei County, near the border and not having eaten in three days. He said you have to remember that. Also do not forget that your mother was raped by soldiers and got pregnant with you only to die in a hail of bullets at childbirth. He said drama was what would make the world love you, such a beautiful creature rescued from such ugliness.

You remember when you were on the aeroplane going to Europe thinking how true it was when the ostriches said that the *mzungu* had wings. You remember seeing your photograph of a rusty gun and a tattered *shuka* from Maasai Market on the cover of a magazine in Europe, and how Goort said this was your plane ticket to success. You were surprised about how all these *mzungus* would get out their handkerchiefs and tissues every time you repeated your story of a child soldier.

Later, when you were so busy and the name Marabou was on everybody's lips and on the sides of buses and the covers of magazines, you started telling Goort that it was very kind of him to buy you all these nice clothes and to pay

the rent and take you wherever you wanted to go but could he also pay for you to improve your English for the times you would wake up in London, and maybe your French for when you were in Paris at a fashion show. And he told you that bubbles would burst if we did that and your plane ticket to success would be taken away if you started talking like a professor. The world loved you, silent and sad with your African beauty.

And you still do not know why the world woke up one morning and stopped loving you. All that you know is that nobody was making phone calls to Goort any more so that you could get on the metro to go for a shoot. You were no longer on the sides of buses. Instead you were a student at the market in Matongé. You were learning economics and history and the mathematics of how far you can fall when your country goes to war from the Rwandese and Congolese and all those other professors who masquerade as second-hand clothes sellers, fishmongers and market women. It felt as if you were back on Kirinyaga Road. So you can say that at least you were happy like in those days of your hole in the wall.

Then Goort disappeared. When he returned all those difficult weeks later when you had almost given up on this love of your life, he was saying "You wreck her!" There was a girl with him as yellow as Stop and she was smiling and clutching his arm as if she was a yellow version of you when you first arrived. Goort said that Sudan was not hot any more. "Ze drama" was now in Angola. Then he talked to you as if you were a man doing up his belt buckle in a corridor on Kirinyaga Road. He said to you *je pense qu'il faut que tu aille*.

That was the day you knew you needed to become a new person again.

The market women in Matongé were very helpful. They gave you the Chinese pills on credit. They said that now you will be transformed into a real African beauty.

They say that if you wish for something too much you should also worry about how you will receive it. Maybe that is why when you were living in some unspeakable tenement in Matongé with the Congolese women and you were so ill that you thought you were going to die, they were kind enough to raise the money for your plane ticket back to Kenya.

You are certain that this is why you are back in the short-time parking after all these years, a plump, yellow ostrich whose skin did not take to hydroquinone, with a *mzungu* who is yelling about diplomatic immunity. You want to tell him to shut up, that if he could shut up he would only lose the mask that he wears. You try to tell him that life is a masquerade and there are wars being fought everywhere.

But the *mzungu* refuses to be quiet. And Rafiq, your new partner in this work of stripping people of what they have because nothing is ever given for free, he is still looking at you with that strange expression when the gun goes off and the world falls silent.

Parselelo Kantai is a Kenyan writer and investigative journalist whose short fiction has been published in *Kwani?* and several anthologies. His debut short story, 'Comrade Lemma and the Black Jerusalem Boys' Band' was shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2004. 'You Wreck Her' appeared first in *St Petersburg Review*, New York, 2008.