



The bus terminus was busy and noisy. The rotation of hawkers at the windows would have one think it was a moving one-stop-shop. One hawker sold water, soda, and biscuits, while another showed up with power banks and earphones. As soon as the two left, another tried to sell the passengers French fries. Typical of the Tea Room bus terminus, the list of people trying to get passengers to part with their money would not have been complete without a “sick” person preying on the compassion of the passengers.

“Two more as we leave,” shouted one of the conductors as he whistled loudly.

“Anyone in a hurry? This one is leaving right now,” said another conductor, banging on the *matatu* as he repeated the exact words.

Only four spots were left when a woman showed up with four children. Alice was instructed to shift to the seat next to the driver’s to give them enough room. She gladly obliged.

Oblivious of the other passengers, she put on her earphones to lock out the rest of the world- a habit common among young people. Carly Rae Jepsen’s version of Both Sides hit her eardrums.

*I looked at life from both sides now*

*From win and lose and still somehow*

*It's life's illusions I recall*

*I really don't know life*

*I've looked at clouds from both sides now*

*From up and down and still somehow*

*It's cloud's illusions I recall*

*I really don't know clouds at all*

*I really don't know life at all*

She hummed along without realizing how loud she was. Unintended, as she tried to get lost in her own world, she dragged a stranger into her real one.

“Deep words there for a gloomy afternoon, don’t you think?” The guy seated next to her said as he tapped her.

“Sorry,” she murmured as she bought time to find a proper response.

“Quite philosophical those lyrics are for such an afternoon,” he responded.

“The beat scores the dull weather,” Alice answered as she passed him one piece of the earphones.

“Well, some might argue that you shouldn’t serve an upbeat with such philosophical thoughts.”

“You disapprove?” Alice asked, raising one brow.

“Of the beat, not the words. I’m afraid I lack the tolerance for new age sounds and, quite frankly, most artists.”

“Oh, come on, not another cliché. Let me guess, new age music is shallow blah blah.”

She rolled her eyes. He saw it and smiled cheekily.

“Hmhm, a feisty one. First, I am a cliché, and then I deserve an eye-rolling? It would only be fair had you asked me for my reason. Women and jumping to conclusions,” he said as he shook his head with a smile.

“And then some more stereotypes. Quite my luck in picking strangers to sit next to,” Alice said as she adjusted her sitting posture.

“Dan, not just a stranger.”

“Okay, Dan. I’m pretty sure you still fit the definition of a stranger, but let’s shelf that one for now.”

He laughed in a way that didn’t hide his amusement. By now, Alice could not decide if she was intrigued or slightly agitated, but he had definitely captured her attention.

“I am still waiting for you to ask the stranger with a name why.”

“Alice here, so why?”

“Because back then, artists stood for something. The depth of the lyrics was constant.

When Luther Vandross sang, *I’d rather* you believed him. You felt the woman’s pain when he left her despite her objections, but the way he came back and told her that he had had a change of heart made you want to plead his case further. You wanted to tell her that she would be a fool not to take him back,” Dan argued passionately.

“There are still such new-age artists.”

“It’s like finding a needle in a haystack.”

“I have a few in mind, and you complained about the beat, not the lyrics,” Alice reminded him.

“I was getting to that. The fast beat hardly works with deep lyrics. A pop beat goes with light messages, not serious messages, a fact the new age artists disregard.”

“A matter of preference, really.”

“Really? Do you think if TLC had sung *Unpretty* using, say, a trance beat, ladies would have reflected on it, or would it have been just another club banger?” Dan asked Alice.

“Fair point, but generations have different sounds, and that’s why we have various song covers,” Alice responded.

“Maybe that’s why women from that generation got the message.”

“There’s no winning with you, is there? Now you have a problem with today’s women, too?”

Alice shrugged.

“ Easy there, tiger, don’t bite me, I’m merely remarking.”

By now, the dull weather had changed, and the dark clouds had begun unleashing massive torrents to the ground. It looked like the push needed to fill the *matatu* as the remaining two passengers boarded. They were ready to leave the city. The driver was the hindrance.

The door opened, and a short lady barely in her thirties took the driver’s seat.

“Is there anyone who hasn’t gotten their balance?” She asked.

Nobody responded, indicating that the ticketing process had been done correctly. Satisfied with the silence, she ignited the engine. Their journey began. There was total silence in the *matatu* among the passengers, as though they were anticipating something.

“This will be a long journey,” Dan hissed almost in a whisper. Alice heard him as they had already formed the habit of involuntarily hearing each other.

\*\*\*\*\*

Africans believed rain carried blessings, but rain in Nairobi city causes havoc. The downpour on that day was no different. The streets were chaotic. The people on the streets rushed up and down to escape the rain. The hawkers appeared from nowhere with umbrellas, shouting their

prices. The beggars disappeared into thin air just as mysteriously as they appeared. It resembled a theatre performance as actors changed from one scene to another.

There was a tap on the driver's window. She lowered the window, and a man called out her name, Kanini. He gave her a parcel to deliver. Kanini started the car in motion again. The rain was on a mission to outdo itself. It even had help from thunder and lightning. The street lights came on early that afternoon.

The road soon became a parking lot as the vehicles hardly moved. After ten minutes of no movement, the road cleared up a bit, and just as they were about to pick up the speed, the *matatu* slowed down. A woman and her three young children looked distraught over crossing the road, so Kanini let them pass before moving forward to another section with heavy traffic. Dan stole several glances at Alice as though to affirm his statement that the journey would be long.

They used the Kariokor route to gain access to Thika Road. The thought seemed to have crossed several drivers' minds because plenty of vehicles were also looking for a shorter route. A bus with booming music came speeding at them and cut them off just as they were taking a turn at the roundabout. A man seated at the back of the *matatu* told his friend how driving in Nairobi required one to be a bully, especially in traffic. The conversation ensued, with two more men chiming in to support the man. They took the innermost lane, which appeared to be moving faster than the other two. Then, suddenly, they were moving at a crawling speed, and the other two lanes opened up. Vehicles moved to the other two lanes. Personal cars mostly avoided the scrambling for lanes with passenger buses. The passenger buses were known for forceful habits on the road. The bus that cut them off earlier was among those changing lanes. It was ahead of them. The driver's bullish behavior seemed to have worked in his favor.

Kanini stuck to her lane. The murmurs in the back grew. Kimende, one of the passengers, opened Pandora's Box.

"See how those other *matatu* drivers are maneuvering this traffic."

“Male drivers are fearless. Women are afraid of the madness,” remarked a woman seated beside him.

Another man pointed to a gap in the lane next to them that they could have occupied. Kanini heard all these remarks. The crease on her face suggested she was getting agitated, but she tried hard to stay calm.

“Still think this will not be a long journey?” Dan asked Alice.

“She is just being careful,” she told him.

“Our friends at the back seem to disagree with that.”

“Just men and their opinions about female drivers,” Alice shrugged.

“Okay, if you say so. So the clouds that you can’t still figure out...”

“Maybe that’s because they just looked at them from two sides.”

“You want them to look at the clouds from a third side?” Dan asked as he laughed.

“It’s like when people look at life as either black or white, completely ignoring the grey areas.

Similar to you saying this would be a long journey just because she is female, or do you want to blame that on intuition?” Alice responded.

“Actually, no, I own that stereotype. You have a different kind of journey with a woman on the wheel.”

It had been about an hour and a half since they left the Central Business District, but they had not made it past Thika Road. The road cleared up, and they picked up speed just as they approached Kenyatta University. They took a detour to a fueling station. Kanini stepped out of the matatu to have it fueled. She probably needed some air, too.

“We are now past the traffic, so we’ll move a bit faster now,” said a woman seated at the back. The division was apparent, but the majority agreed though, albeit half-heartedly. Dan and Alice drifted into further conversation. Kanini got back to the car and started the engine. They were now Sagana-bound.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Oya! If you find three more on the road, don’t leave them,” the conductor told the driver. The bus was named *Asali*. The exterior of the bus was heavily laden with graffiti that resembled a beehive with honey dripping at the front and at the door. The artist meticulously put hexagonal prismatic honey cob shapes as the outline of the windows. The dark-tinted windows appeared to be the center of cells inside the bee hive.

The lower side of the bus had a lot of brown, like a plaque formed by excess honey over time. The bus fit into the profile associated with the *Matwana* Culture—a culture that embraces art and other nuances of the transport industry in the city of Nairobi.

Three guys stopped the bus as if fate bent to accommodate his will. The conductor ushered them in and asked them to hurry because the bus had stopped at an undesignated picking zone. The three guys spread out at the front, middle, and back of the bus. The bus was fitted with display screens so the passengers could watch music videos as they traveled. The bus had just passed Ruiru on its way to Thika.

It was on a different lane from Kanini’s *matatu*. However, a trailer and an old canter lorry on *Asali*’s lane slowed down the vehicles on that lane. Kanini’s lane was fast-moving, but just as she was about to drive past *Asali*, the driver again found a way to cut her off and joined that lane. *Asali*’s conductor went to get bus fare from one of the passengers who had just boarded the bus at the back, and that was when the dominos came tumbling down.

The passenger showed him a gun and told him to go and lock the door. The other two passengers strategically stood at the front and center, also showing their guns.

“Do not attempt to touch your cell phones or scream for help, or that will be the last thing you do in this lifetime,” one of the armed hijackers said. His face showed no sign of anxiety. The calmness in his voice while making the threat and his composed demeanor told a tale of a man who lacked remorse and would follow through with that threat. In fact, the coldness in his eyes almost shouted, “I dare you.”

The driver was then instructed not to make any other stop unless the hijackers said otherwise. Meanwhile, on the bus, it was 'offertory time.' They often joke that a thief can smell money, but you could disregard this until you witness it. Passenger by passenger, the hijackers moved. The drill was simple, phone first, followed by the wallet, and then they would move to other items like jewelry.

\*\*\*\*\*

Alice stared at the speedometer severally. It was still reading sixty kilometers per hour. She fidgeted and shifted the position of her legs. However, given the space in the *matatu*, there was very little room to change positions. She was uncomfortable. It had been over two hours since they started that journey. Ordinarily, the journey took about two hours, but they had only gotten past Thika town, and there was quite a distance ahead of them.

"Practicing a routine with your ass?" Dan said as he winked and smiled from the side of his mouth.

"Staying still for this long does not agree with my body."

"Do I hear a concession coming up?"

"That gauge could definitely hit eighty legally," Alice admitted.

"What was that? I didn't hear you." Dan said as he leaned closer to her with his hand on his ear, indicating that he needed her to shout a little more. He laughed sarcastically.

Dan's huge grin was interrupted by Kanini as she commented on the bus in the next lane.

"Didn't that bus pass us a while ago?" Kanini asked as she pointed towards *Asali*.

"That one and many others, but who's counting?" Alice thought of telling her, but Kimende, who had also heard the question, beat her to it. Kanini rolled her eyes. She had had enough of the judging. You could tell that this wasn't her first experience with difficult passengers, but she was human too. She had to have a breaking point.



Disregarding Kimende's remark, she went on to say, "That bus goes to Thika. Why hasn't it branched? The door is also closed, and by now, there would be about three guys at the door screaming to announce its arrival. It is a very popular bus on this route."

"Maybe someone hired it," Dan said.

"Maybe, but most of these 'Nganyas' are mostly hired when high schools are closing for holidays or mid-term breaks. During normal times, people prefer hiring less noisy buses. Hiring these new buses can also be expensive," Kanini explained.

Another bus overtook them, but *Asali* did not seem to be in a hurry. Alice's hope for a little more speed dwindled as she looked for another position to sit in, completely ignoring Dan's laughter.

"Hello, we have just passed Thika, but it will take at least over an hour to get there. Just leave without me. I will catch up with you later," a woman on the phone said. This elicited a discussion with another passenger, who expressed how slow the *matatu* was.

"We should have followed the Githurai bus at the service lane. Those bus drivers know how to evade the traffic," one man said.

"The Githurai ones are driven by men. No woman would handle that madness," a woman in the back seat exclaimed. The remarks seemed to resonate with the majority of the passengers in the *matatu*. They looked like they could break into a chant demanding to be driven faster.

They'd paid for it, and isn't the customer always right?

Kanini did not utter a single word. She looked as though she was burning to talk but decided against it. The speedometer almost touched seventy from the sixty they had been moving at.

Alice cheered her on silently, but almost doesn't count. They are back to sixty. Alice

disapproved of the remarks but did not particularly like the speed at which they were moving.

A young lady at the back told off the rest and asked them to let the driver do her job. The

comment was unexpected, and there was total silence for a moment, as though it was meant to

give people a moment of reflection. Kimende then said, "Even a ship's captain is sometimes

advised on how to cruise the ship." Kanini, almost in a whisper, asked, "If it were a man driving,

would you question his decisions?" Dan started to respond to her but was cut short by a loud bang followed by ear-piercing screams.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I want to get out, I want to get out! I don't have any other money with me."

"Young lady, give us that ring, or we'll shoot you!"

"Not the ring, I beg of you. This is all I have left of him. Please, I beg you, not the ring. I have given you everything I have; please don't take the ring," she pleaded, tears falling down her cheeks.

"*Morio*, just finish her up. She is wasting our time. We are almost there," shouted one of the hijackers to the one dealing with the young lady.

"Madam, I don't need you to beg. I need you to put that ring with the rest of the things, now!"

The other passengers nudged her to comply, but it was futile. She crawled to the bus floor and began begging for the ring. The hijacker in the middle of the bus could not contain his fury anymore, and he discharged his weapon. The gun was aimed at the young lady who was forcefully taking back her seat at the command of the hijacker who was at the back of the bus. Screams of pain, fear, and panic filled the air. Accompanying the screams was blood gushing everywhere. The young lady was no longer pleading for her ring. All they could see was blood. So much blood. The man seated behind the young lady screamed, informing everyone on the bus that he, too, had been a victim of the bullet. The young lady's wound was a through-and-through bullet wound that nicked her jugular, and the bullet went onto the man's shoulder.

The man wailed like a wounded animal in dire pain. The hijacker at the back panicked and hit the screaming man with the gun on his head to keep him silent. The young lady was losing too much blood too fast. The woman beside her had placed a cloth on her neck, but it was not working. The hijacker at the front had his gun pointed at the driver to ensure he did not stop.

The panic in the bus couldn't be diffused even by the loud music. The loud screams and calls for divine help were silenced by fear of being shot at like the young lady.

The young lady drifted into unconsciousness, and the woman holding her couldn't keep from wailing when she saw her breathe her last. She searched for a pulse frantically, but nothing. She pressed the cloth harder to build more pressure, but nothing. It was too late, and she knew it. The young lady lost both her life and the ring. The hijacker responsible for this had just taken her ring from her finger seconds before she lost consciousness as though to rub in the fact that they still got what they wanted despite her objections.

"You had one little task, to remove the ring from your finger and put it in the bag. This is where your stupidity got you," were the last words she heard before she met her maker. He spat on her, and her spirit left her body.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Do we have a puncture?" One woman asked.

"What was that loud noise? I think it came from that bus," said Kimende.

"What was that? Is that a scream?" Alice asked an equally scared Dan, who was clutching her hand. His face was still calm, though. Kanini's look, however, was not very encouraging. She looked at them and informed them that that was a gunshot.

"That was a gunshot from that bus," she said. Her look screamed certainty, as though she couldn't have mistaken the sound of a gunshot for any other sound. The man seated next to Kimende suggested that she hoot at the bus, but she declined.

"If this is a hijacking incidence, it will alert the hijackers that we are onto them," said Kanini.

They all took a moment to process the information. These were things that happened in the movies. Someone suggested they should call the police, and everyone agreed, but as fate would have it, there were signal problems in that area. Getting a clear connection was problematic, but the man making the call was told to keep trying until there was a connection.

Kanini tried to overtake the bus so that they could see what was going on inside. However, many cars were in the other lane, and they hardly had a chance. Driving closely behind *Asali*, they ensured there was no space between them and the bus. The network connection was still

poor, and they couldn't make the call. Kanini told the passengers seated at the back to move to the seats at the front. There was murmuring with a bit of defiance almost mushrooming, but the fear overrode any criticism. Kanini was the captain of that ship, and she damn well looked like she knew what she was doing.

"What are you planning on doing?" Dan asked Kanini. "Won't they shoot us too?"

"The only plan I have is to arrive alive to my kids. They already have one dead parent; they don't need another, and hopefully, those parents get to their kids," she said as she pointed at the bus. In the back of the *matatu*, the passengers were shifting positions. The men let the two women with children sit in the middle for more protection. Two more people got on the emergency calls.

\*\*\*\*\*

Tears flowed freely on their faces as others closed their eyes in anticipation of the end. Many people have the same imagination. The image was that of a frail old person with grey hair in a bed surrounded by children and grandchildren.

They were all there except Florence, the one in Germany. She was there the last time, so it would be too much to ask her to keep coming back every time the doctors said, "Maybe next week." But you are stubborn in your death as you were all through life, and the life machines acknowledge it. Thankfully it's not cancer, but it's one of those old people's diseases that cripple your mobility, and your lungs are like balloons that need help with air pumping. The family is there to assure you that you can now let go; they will be okay. In return, you promise to watch over them while waiting for them in the land yonder. That is how you imagine going out, not at the hands of ruthless hijackers who spit on dying people.

The 'collection' of items was over, with the lady's ring as the last item of entry. Phase three of the hijack ensued. The hijacker at the back nodded to the other two, and they nodded back to illustrate that whatever they had planned was a go. The driver was told to decrease his speed slightly, and the conductor was told to move closer to the door and to get ready to open it on

instructions. The nightmare looked like it was about to end with the exit plan. The hijackers told the bus driver to turn left at the next junction. The driver decreased the speed and indicated his intention to turn.

\*\*\*\*\*

Kanini, having observed the bus, indicated that she was about to stop. The bus turned at the Makutano junction towards Embu. Kanini stopped for a few minutes then turned as well and sped up. The phone signal was much better, and the call to the police went through. They asked a couple of questions before promising to send a dispatch. *Asali* was now in sight and appeared to have slowed down a bit.

There was a roadblock ahead, and the question was how the hijackers would get past it without raising suspicion. Kanini suddenly sped and overtook the bus just as they approached the roadblock. The move was unprecedented, forcing the bus driver to use the emergency brakes, but it was too late, so the bus hit Kanini's *matatu* from behind.

The loud bang brought everything to a standstill for a moment, followed by screams and gunshots. The ringing sound in the ear made everything move a bit more slowly than in real-time. The police rushed towards the scene, and Kanini pointed to the bus. Two police officers moved towards the bus, while one was left checking on the *matatu*. The hijackers panicked; that wasn't part of their plan. They had to improvise.

The hijacker at the front collided with the conductor as he tried to open the door and flee. The other two hijackers were close behind, but they couldn't get away without a scene. One shot in the air to create panic as they ran away. The armed men of service shot at the hijackers, who in turn shot back. The roadblock was now a battlefield.

One of the hijackers was hit in the knee and fell down with the bag, which contained the stolen items. The other hijacker hid behind a tree and continued to shoot at the police.

The hijacker who jumped out of the bus first was now miles away despite the efforts of the police. The one behind the tree ran out of bullets, and he attempted to run for his life. He hardly

made four steps away before a bullet hit his back, and he fell. The one on his knees was now nursing more excruciating pain from his hand as one police officer shot his hand as he tried to shoot.

On the ground lay the bus conductor, who was bleeding profusely. He was caught in the crossfire and suffered a shot to his leg. With the look of things, it looked as though the femoral artery had been severed. The police rushed to the hijackers. Both were still alive but with severe gunshot wounds. A crowd had formed, helping the passengers in the *matatu* and bus. Kanini looked back to ensure that everyone was okay. The impact of the bus on the *matatu* was not so bad; and only one passenger had suffered an injury, and the children wouldn't stop crying. Everyone understood their distress. The adults also wished they could scream and let it out like them. The idea of moving to the front seats now made sense.

In the bus, the terrified passengers come out with an urgency to breathe in the fresh air as though they had just been released from the chambers of hell. They had just experienced hell in a beehive aping structure. The tears of relief, shock, and pain all flowed. Some were nursing a few injuries from the sudden stop of the bus. The man with a gunshot to his shoulder and a blow to his head after the hijacker hit him was brought out.

The passengers at the back came out, holding him as the ambulances started arriving. The sirens, the red lights, the cries, the hugs, and the dead bodies told a tale. The conductor succumbed to his injury, too. The bus driver could not come out of the bus, and the paramedics had to help him. He was in a trance and couldn't utter a single word. The police officers accompanied the wounded hijackers to the hospital.

Another set of police officers came to get statements from the passengers in both vehicles. The passengers made numerous calls to their families. A few passengers fell to their knees to thank God for the rescue. The woman who had tried to help the young lady still had her hands on the lady's neck. She stared at her with no emotion on her face, no tears, just her hands on the neck

of the dead body as though waiting for a miracle to happen. The paramedics whispered something in her ears and then lifted her hands off the body, but she remained there in a daze. The media got wind of the incident and arrived as the people tended to the wounds and gave statements. The story of Kanini, the female *matatu* driver who aided in rescuing a bus with hijackers, spread in loud whispers. They waited for Kanini to finish giving her statement to the police, then ambushed her. The ever-enthusiastic journalists were all out with their rolling cameras and microphones, waiting to ask her questions.

“How did you know there was a problem?” “When did you hatch the plan to stop the bus?” Kanini looked at them as though they were aliens and then said, “I just want to go home to my children.” Then she walked away. Meanwhile, Kimende and the rest of the passengers from the *matatu* looked at her, and they all clapped to applaud her. The applause gained momentum, and everybody at the scene cheered her on for her bravery.

“I stand corrected, madam Alice,” said Dan.

“She just wanted to get home to her children and help other parents do the same,” Alice responded.

“The courage that can spur.”

“To think I almost changed my mind and crossed over to your ‘anti-female drivers’ side.]

“Hmmh, you telling me? I watched you do the ass routine as you checked on that speedometer every ten minutes,” Dan said with a smile.

Kimende and the other passengers moved into smaller crowds engaged in heated discussions about the journey.

“It looks as though we are many in the reflections’ corner,” said Alice.

“That we sure are. Can I have your number?” Dan asked.

“Huh?”

“Well, now that I am certainly not a stranger, I’d want to make sure we don’t travel together again.”

They both laughed.

"I sure will avoid seating next to strangers named Dan," said Alice.

"Hey, don't be quick on that. You sure do know clouds now. Maybe that was the other side you hadn't seen yet," Dan said, lifting both hands slightly.

"Touché," said Alice with a shy grin as she walked away.

They all looked forward to going home after an eventful afternoon.