

SOMEONE ELSE'S HOUSE

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

We were late to meet Wakim at the reception door. His eyes were badly bloodshot. We got into the truck and had no problem passing through the gates and away. The driver said that President Museveni had stayed the night at the lodge and had left early in the morning. He rubbed his head. 'No one got much sleep.'

'Why was he here?' Elkie asked.

The driver kept his eyes on Elkie. 'We don't talk of these things,' he said. 'Talking makes words come alive, gives them wings to fly to dangerous places.'

I put a hand on Elkie's thigh and he looked down. The journey back was done in silence. Now and then we stopped to take a photo of trees with scarlet flowers or cattle with heads weighed down by the longest of horns. On the outskirts of Kampala, Wakim said there was enough time to look for my old house again, that he had asked around and now he knew how to find it.

I thought of the square brick building with a view over the city, where every day had warmth, where I saw a wall of rain arrive not long after I did, where I moved about in cool rooms and had a pet tortoise, and where a woman looked after me, who shared her dishes of Matoki and bean sauce when it was her day off.

Wakim watched me in the rear-view mirror as, for the final time, we travelled along the Entebbe road. We took several sharp bends as we went up into a hill and I knew it was waiting for us. We sat outside the gate and Wakim turned around to see me nod. He called over to a man in the garden who waved at us. The Bugandan conversation was short and amicable as the gates opened. The engine revved and we sped forward, swinging around the carbuncle mound that led to the house.

An old lady came out and bowed to Elkie and me. Wakim asked if we could see inside the house as I started to squeeze the seat in front of me.

‘She doesn’t mind if you go inside,’ Wakim said ‘But she’s embarrassed as the house is not in good repair. They have little money.’

‘It doesn’t feel right,’ I said.

He looked at me with a patience he might reserve for his children, if he had them.

‘It’s too late to change your mind,’ he said. ‘If you wish to thank her, you can buy one of her son’s paintings he keeps in the garage. Then no one feels bad.’

The woman smiled and spoke in English. ‘Come,’ she said.

I went through the garage and up the stairs that took me into a square room that was the hall and dining room. Everything looked so much smaller than before. The old woman pointed to an entrance and I had a quick look inside the living room where my father had listened to Kathleen Ferrier on a record player that had travelled from Scotland.

‘I cannot let you go upstairs,’ she said, pulling a piece of blue cloth across her shoulders.

I was about to go downstairs again when she took my hand and said we would leave the other way, through the dining room hall to a netted door that I could still feel and smell from childhood. Passing the same window where my pet chameleon would flip out its strip of tongue for a fly.

‘My husband and I had this house built and rented it to your father.’ I stopped walking.

‘We were doctors, working in Jinja, and my husband said he was Scottish.’

She opened the door and, as I walked through, I saw my brother rolling around on his yellow tractor and my sister jumping off the balcony to prove she could do it. I looked up to the dust patch garden and saw the familiar cement hut. Smaller than a garage but not big enough for cows or horses. I knew inside that box: its window the length and width of a grown man’s face, the thin mattress near on the floor next to the wall. Pots and pans huddled in the corner. A side room that had a hole in the ground. Outside the door, a small pit for fires. That’s where the woman, Rosie, who looked after us lived. The old woman tapped my arm as a shadow appeared outside the hut. Rosie, who wasn’t my relative but who fed us, cleaned our clothes, sang songs to my brother, her little mboom mboom. Who had hung him over the balcony to hear him shriek and who told me that I would be the first to die out of my siblings

(of a very long and drawn out awful disease). Rosie who was twenty-six, who had one day off a week, who lived so far from her own children and rarely, if ever, saw them; who sent her earnings to her own parents for their upkeep. I wondered if her children, her own mboom mbooms, remembered her.

I walked quickly along the side paving stones, down the outside steps to the truck. I'm almost in when I get out again and go into the garage. Four or five easels are strewn around the room and there are canvases everywhere.

Wakim appeared at my side. 'Choose one,' he said.

I picked the one with the long horn cows and left the money on a table near the entrance. The old woman looked a little confused at my upset but said nothing. She simply bowed again and left.

We drove on to the airport in silence. At the terminal, I got out of the jeep and gave Wakim an envelope with the tip. He opened it, nodded and shook my hand. 'You two must take care of each other,' he said and, as he began to walk away, he turned around. 'My name is James, James Wakim. Safe journey home.'

Jane's short stories have been shortlisted & commended in the Bridport Prize, The White Review & Manchester Fiction prize. She has been published in New Writing Scotland, Mslexia and Scottish PEN's anthology 'Declarations: On Freedom for Writers and Readers'. She is currently working on a novel 'Cutting the Roses', which has been longlisted in the inaugural Deborah Rogers New Writers' Award and Lucy Cavendish Prize. In 2019, Jane received a Luminate Scotland bursary to support completion of the book. She lives in Perthshire and teaches P/T at Perth college.