

Till Tomorrow

by Patrick Kamara

A sample of the opening pages

One

Mugisha thrust the metallic wheels of his wheelchair as he moved into the living room of his apartment. The familiar smell of dust and musty furniture assaulted his nostrils as he wheeled deeper into the room. The room's general shabbiness barely registered with him. He doubted anything would ever evoke a significant reaction from him. He'd lost almost all contact with reality because he had simply lost too much to care anymore. There was very little feeling left.

The silver and bronze medals displayed across the room seemed to mock him as they brilliantly reflected the morning sun streaming through the window. He quickly turned his eyes away from them. Looking at them brought back unwanted memories. He moved through the room into the tiny kitchen. It was equally as messy as the living room. In fact, every room in the small apartment had the aura of neglect. Like no one lived inside their walls.

Mugisha slowly moved towards an old sink placed below a boarded up window. He stopped in front of it to massage his temple with the tips of his fingers. The pounding in his head was getting worse. He awkwardly reached for a thin short plastic cup that lay beside the sink and filled it with water from the silver faded tap. After finishing the drink in two long gulps he helped himself with more. He vaguely noticed that even his desire to eat had gone as had so many other things. He was clearly no longer the energetic creature he used to be.

His appearance was almost a direct reflection of his state of mind. His beard was wild and overgrown, his eyes bloodshot and hair a rumpled mess. Anyone who had seen Mugisha a year ago would acknowledge the difference a year could make in a person's life.

Almost twelve months ago, Mugisha was an extraordinary young athlete. At only twenty one, he had accomplished a staggering record of long and short distance races. His athletic popularity and physical prowess was rivaled by none in the entire country. Mugisha had never actually planned on becoming an athlete. An opportunity had presented itself during his childhood days that enabled him to demonstrate his ability to run a great distance in the shortest period of time possible. During those days, he was living at an orphanage having lost his parents at the age of two. Mugisha outran a young training athlete at the age of twelve causing him to come to the attention of an athlete coach that decided his talent was one worth nurturing. Convinced that he could actually make a good athletic runner, Mugisha poured all his energy into developing speed and agility. Within the next seven years, he had become well known among many sports

fans around East Africa. Year after year, he won medals that served to prove that he was a young master of his skills. One downside to Mugisha's sports exploits was his total neglect of school or anything academic. Having been unable to afford quality education while at the orphanage, Mugisha had given up hope of any kind of academic career. At one time, his sponsors offered to give him some money to complete his studies but he arrogantly refused. Several of the people close to him openly voiced their concern at his decision to put studies at arm's length at the expense of achieving a bright sports career but Mugisha turned a deaf ear and the consequences of his arrogance showed themselves in the next few months.

Having turned twenty, an age at which many young adults of his age in Uganda were getting University education, Mugisha was preparing to compete internationally. He seemed poised for a wonderful life filled with opportunities and fantasy like achievement when the cruel hand of irony struck his life. While staying in a seven storied apartment building on the out skirts of Kampala city, a minor architectural fault caused the collapse of the entire building. Mugisha was extremely lucky to have come out of the accident alive (as so many hadn't) but his back had been crushed by a loose bolder causing irreversible damage to his spine. Having been rendered incapable of moving his legs anymore, Mugisha was confined to a wheel chair for the rest of his life. The future that had seemed so possible and assured was suddenly crashed. He lost his career along with so many other friends and supporters. Unfortunately for Mugisha, he had sacrificed almost every relationship and opportunity at the cost of athletic track running and was thus thrown into a bottomless pit of depression.

Having taken his drink, he slowly wheeled himself out of kitchen. He had started to make for the door to the compound at the back of the house when he heard a loud knock at the front door. It was an alien sound. He wasn't interested in what anyone had to say or offer. He contemplated ignoring the person whoever it was until they decided to leave but as he did so, the pounding on the door became even more vigorous and he suddenly had an idea about who it could be. He slowly made his way to the door and silently unlocked it.

As he suspected Nisima Anne stood in the door frame. All five foot and 165 pounds of her. She wore her usual ankle length intricately decorated locally made dress. She seemed to putting on extra weight with every day that passed, and her usually lean face was slightly puffed up at the cheeks.

"I have told you many times before that ignoring visitors is not going to improve your situation," she immediately snapped without preamble. Her golden brown eyes narrowed in their characteristic fashion. Mugisha ignored his sister's rebuke.

"What are you doing here this early?" he asked. He was surprised but not displeased to see her. She was one of few people that came back to check on him every now and then.

"Are you going to invite me in or do you want me to freeze in this weather?" she replied in a steely tone. Mugisha moved aside and let her in without a comment. Nisima shut the door

behind her and turned to face the rubbish pit of a room.

"How can you live like this?" Nisima asked, totally aghast as she scanned the littered room. Mugisha said nothing. He continued to rub his throbbing temple with his hand. Five days ago, she had helped him clean up the entire place but within that time he had managed to bring it back to its original state.

"How many times should I tell you," she began as she rounded on him, "that what happened to you was not the end of life? You have family and many years ahead of you. Do not just throw it away..." she went on. Mugisha knew she was right. What happened to him was no excuse to give up on everything but he was in no mood for her lectures.

"Why are you here?" he shot back. He was surprised by the harshness of his tone. He had no ill feelings towards Nisima. On the contrary, she was one of the few people he cared about but he wanted this conversation to be as short as possible. Nisima shook her head and slowly sunk into the old couch behind her.

"If I am not mistaken, by the end of the day you will have gotten yourself a job." she said.

Mugisha stared at her a moment. "From whom?" he asked.

"An old friend of mine has agreed to come and offer you an opportunity to--"

"He is coming here?!"

"Yes. That's why you should get this place cleaned up. I'll help you but you also have to do your part. Wash up, put on presentable clothes, shave--"

"What type of job?" Mugisha asked, interrupting her again. Trying to determine whether he wanted to meet this person or not.

"Listen. It's a small job and the pay is little but it will help you cope." She stopped to look around at the room again with dismay on her face. "But I won't tell you anything else until we do something about this mess."

Mugisha sighed and leaned back in the cotton strap of his wheel chair. It was true he needed the money. The apartment he was currently in wasn't his to own forever. The owner of the destroyed building had given it to him for a few months out of guilt and as some kind of compensation. He definitely needed some money.

"When is he coming?" he asked, his hand at his forehead again.

"In a few hours."

Mugisha simply nodded and Nisima took that as his way of saying he was fine with the arrangements.

They immediately set about cleaning the place. It was tedious work for Mugisha given his limitation but Nisima was a great help. Within two hours, they were done. Even during their

youth she was always offering her assistance where she could.

They had grown up together at the orphanage in their home district Kabale. Even though she wasn't his biological sister, he had come to regard her as one. They had grown so close that people often mistook them for actual brother and sister.

At one o'clock, Nisima began to prepare a simple meal. Mugisha was in his room trying to fix a faulty drawer when for the second time that day, his activities were interrupted by a knock at the front door. Mugisha stopped what he was doing and listened in stunned silence to the rattling on the door. He hadn't seen and talked to anyone in days and now within the space of three hours two visitors had arrived on his door step. Could Nisima's friend have arrived already? No. She told him that the person would be coming in the evening. Then who was it? The day was starting out strange.

He moved into the living room only to find that his sister had already answered the door.

He looked past her frame to see a young scruffily dressed boy standing at the door step. He looked no more than fifteen years old and for some reason, his eyes nervously darted back and forth between Nisima and through the door to Mugisha himself. A brown envelope was clutched in his small hands. Mugisha had never seen the boy before. Nisima however, seemed less surprised by his presence and immediately asked him what it was he wanted. The boy quickly handed her the envelope. Nisima examined it, thanked him and shut the door.

"Who was that?" Mugisha asked, completely puzzled. Nisima didn't answer at first. She was looking at the brown envelope in her hand and nodding her head slightly.

"It's a letter addressed to you," she said as she handed it to her puzzled brother, "however, I knew that you were going to receive it."

"What do you mean? And who was that just now at my door?"

"You should get more familiar with your neighbors but that is a story for another time," she said, then gestured to the letter in his hand, "go ahead and open it. It is from Mwesigwa."

Mugisha looked at her in surprise. Mwesigwa was the caretaker of the orphanage in which they had both grown. She had nurtured them from a tender age and so she was like a mother to them. Mugisha had not heard or spoken to her in a long time. He was surprised to realize that his throat felt constricted.

His name was written across the brown paper in large capital letters. He opened it and extracted a short white sheet of paper which was written upon in a slanting handwriting that he instantly recognized. Much as Mugisha had never attended school, he took pride in having taught himself how to read and write in English. He even spoke the language frequently. Incidentally, he'd been aided by Mwesigwa herself. She was an avid believer in education and the English written letter was proof of her continuous encouragement to Mugisha as well as other children she had cared for to persist in their quest to achieve academic knowledge.

He read. It was brief and to the point.

Dear David,

It's been a long time since we last talked especially since after the accident. It pains me that we have created a wall between ourselves and I confess that I am at a loss as to why you seldom communicate with me. I have written this letter to tell you that everything is well with me and the children. Come 24th July; we shall be having a 50 year Anniversary celebration at the orphanage. I would like that you attend it needless to say that we could use the occasion to catch up on the time we have spent apart.

Hope to see you then.

God bless you,

SARAH MWESIGA

The letter had a formal touch to it that bothered Mugisha. He couldn't help but sense a cold vibe coming from his foster mother and felt an irrefutable feeling that it had to do with the fact that he hadn't spoken to her in months. He also felt an unbidden and familiar sense of guilt. After the accident he had shut out almost every one due to the heavy mental toll that had over powered him to the point that he felt he was no longer in control of his actions.

"I too shall be attending the event," said Nisima, who had been hovering above him. "We shall go together."

Mugisha said nothing. His desire to see Mwesiga again clashed heavily with his promise not to indulge in anything that concerned his past life.

"Are you planning not to attend?" Nisima asked wearily. She'd sensed his hesitation. "Mother has been very worried about you. You are coming with me next weekend and I will not hear another word about it," Nisima said, having seen her brother about to object.

At around three o'clock, Nisima left. They'd eaten a satisfying lunch together. Before she left she helped him put final touches to the organizing of the house. Mugisha had only gone through the activity for Nisima's sake. The dominant feeling inside him still one of hopelessness. Inwardly he knew he would have to get over what happened to him one way or the other but for now he wanted to stay in his present state as a kind of fulfillment to great sport to which he had given so much.

During the house clean-up, he'd put his medals, trophies and other souvenirs inside a large cardboard box which he then placed in the store room at the back of the house. He decided to go and take a look at them. Normally, he avoided even looking or touching them but for some unexplainable reason-even to himself-he wanted to do so today. He slowly began to make his way to the store room. He had hardly moved a few feet when his back was struck with a sharp and agonizing pain. He bit back a gasp as the pain spread. He had forgotten about his

medication. Ever since the accident and operation on his back; he had been experiencing frequent back pains. The doctors at the hospital had assured him the pain would go away over time and that all he had to do was take a regular dose of prescribed tablets.

Annoyed at having forgotten about them, he made his way back to the kitchen where he searched through the wooden cupboards for the white circular tablets that he had come to loath as much as anything else. He found them, selected a few and washed them down with a long drink of water.

When he finally made it to the store room, he found it a struggle to remove the old furniture and other junk to finally access the cardboard box he had placed there only a while back. One by one, he looked at his medals. He simply held them and placed them to the side. He vividly recalled receiving a particular one. It was silver and had the figure of a man in sprint posture sculpted on its circular plate. It was one of the first he had ever received...No!! He quickly put it to the side. He vowed not to let the memories engulf him.

He came across so many newspaper clippings he'd earlier collected. Most of them bore headlines that spoke of a young boy that had amazed critics and fans with his outstanding performance. His snapshots were positioned next to every one of such articles. However, one particular newspaper article bore a tragic headline. One that talked of a disastrous event that had taken the lives of many citizens. Mugisha kept the article because of what that day had cost him. Most of its words were ingrained in his mind. It gave detailed descriptions of the scene at the building site, the gathering crowd, the family members of the victims, the police force and rescue teams that had come to save whoever might have survived the catastrophe and much more.

End of sample

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