

TWISTED TIMES TRILOGY

Praise for *Son of Man*

This is not your normal crime story, neither is it a case of murders nor a mystery, but it is a story of survival...

Dora Achieng', Kenyan Author

What I love most about the story is how the author managed the plot, in a suspenseful and articulated way. The sex scenes are scintillating, well-described. And the characters were captured with precision.

Mystery Books Reviews

The novel is indeed a gargantuan masterpiece ... It is a suspense thriller, a crime-fiction, a sociological novel, and also an educational or literary novel. Indeed, there is hope for Kenyan literature, because an able replacement is available for Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The novel is indeed suspenseful, dynamic and full of intrigues and deception only found in Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* and *Petals of Blood*.

Akwu Sunday Victor, Nigerian Critic

Vincent de Paul is a writer to watch out for when it comes to action thrillers. If you enjoy reading the likes of Sydney Sheldon, Robert Ludlum, James Patterson, etc. then *Twisted Times: Son of Man* is a must have on your book shelf!

Nduka Ekeh, Nigerian Poet

There is a play by play theme where some chapters are in first voice ... and some in the third voice. This switch gives the story a complex look into the life of crime while giving the book an even pace.

Goodreads

TWISTED TIMES

Son of Man

Book one of Twisted Times trilogy

novel

VINCENT DE PAUL



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First published online (POD), on CreateSpace Independent Publishing – 2015
Kindle Edition, by Mystery Books, an imprint of Mystery Publishers – 2015
Smashwords Edition, by Mystery Books – 2017
Revisions – 2017

Cover design by Herbert Manula

Published by:
Mystery Books, an imprint of
Mystery Publishers Limited
P.O. BOX 18016 – 20100
Tel: +254 718 429 184
Nakuru, Kenya

Email: publishing@mysterypublisherslimited.com
www.mysterypublisherslimited.com

Available from Amazon.com, CreateSpace.com, Mystery Bookstore, and other online retail outlets, Kindle and other devices

For

Pauline Joseph

Arrogance and self-awareness seldom walk hand in hand.

PROLOGUE

THE MATERNITY WARD WAS A dissonance of doctors issuing orders, nurses rushing frantically responding to the doctors' orders, and the wails of women in labour.

Searing and excruciating pain shot through Shannon.

She had never felt like this before. She fought back tears and tried hard not to scream, but it was not working. She wanted to hit everyone near her.

Never again will I do this.

"Push!" the midwife urged in an impatient tone.

Did she have to be so rude?

Shannon gritted her teeth.

"Push harder!"

Shannon tried.

Death was knocking.

She was sure she had heard death's knell.

The pain engulfed her, and the last thing she remembered was the frail cry of a child.

Loss of Grace

CHAPTER 1

Eighteen Years Later:

WHEN MY LIFE'S JOURNEY CAME to a fork, I became a stranger.

I lived with my parents in Kabati, Thika, close to the Del Monte pineapple plantation. Our house was small: a slanting iron sheet roof, stone walls, three rooms, and a small treeless compound where at the corner was my single room '*thingira*'.

Life was what I made for myself, a conviction I made to challenge my father. To succeed in life was not just to pass national exams, but also to do what I thought I wanted.

There was a war between Dad and me. I avoided him like the plague, but it did not always work.

My mother had become the unwilling referee, torn between taking sides with her son or husband. She was a human piñata, taking our subtle punches, without giving up her quest to bring peace in the family.

I hated that we made her choose sides.

Dad used her to soften the ground when he wanted to talk to me. When Mother came to my house, I made sure she

understood that any truce forthcoming would be on *my* terms.

Today was no different.

“Come in,” I said.

Mother entered my house.

“Well, how did it go?” she asked in a light tone.

I could tell that she had a lot to tell me, but I was not ready to listen to her.

“He told me his plans for the umpteenth time,” I said. “It made no difference to me. He is still as rigid as ever. Nevertheless, I will show him I have a mind of my own! I swear I will.”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts, Mom. Sometimes I wish I didn’t live in this hell of a home.”

She flinched and I knew I had said the wrong thing. In another life, I would have dodged a slap.

“We all understand but ...”

“Mom, why don’t you say *you* understand?” I asked. “Time and again, Dad interferes with my plans and you say ‘*we*’, even when you don’t agree. You know he’s wrong this time.”

“You should be careful, son. He’s your father.”

That stung me. I wanted to yell at her but something held me back.

He is not my father.

“Enough,” I said. “Leave me alone. If he disowns me for getting my way, then let it be. I won’t bend to his side this time round.”

I spoke with such finality that I saw Mom startled.

Inside my ribcage my heart bounced, pounding. My lips quivered, and hands clenched into fists.

“Your father cares for your happiness more than you think. He wants you happy.”

Her hand was on the doorknob, its movements nervous.

I said nothing.

“He is calling you now!” she told me. Her voice was almost frightening as she said in a hoarse whisper, “He wants to talk to you.”

When I didn’t move, she turned to leave, but then halted. After a moment, she turned to me.

“A father’s curse is crippling, be careful,” she said.

And with that, she left my house

I did not want to see my father.

Still, I got up from my desk and followed my mother.

“Come on in, Ken. What a man you’ve become! We were just talking about you.”

It was my uncle, Job, who said this when I appeared at the entrance to the main house. I had known that he was around when I saw his Land Cruiser Prado outside.

I went to him and shook his hand.

“Have a seat, Ken.”

I sat in the armchair next to *Dad*. I felt like I was going to suffocate, and I prayed they would chitchat all day and say nothing to me.

Uncle Job did not waste time, though.

“Ken,” Uncle Job said.

I sat still, thinking of how to stand up to them.

“Sir!” I said.

“I am about to give you something that you will never forget. I would like you to have the best in this life.”

Uncle Job paused to take a sip of his tea before continuing.

“I have talked with your father, and what I get is nasty bullshit that you want to go to the university. Why are you so naïve? Never turn down a lucrative offer. You never know which one might be your dream.”

“Son, if I had a chance like this at your age, I would be a billionaire today,” my father said. “Do not break your uncle’s heart by ...”

I was not ready for their small talk, but I waited for them to finish whatever they were saying to me.

When Uncle Job finished his lecture, I was almost convinced: monies in abundance, trips to any country in the world, connections with people who mattered, and the path to all the luxury in the world, despite being a puppet-master, I would join the elite club, be one with those who made the world go round. Tempting.

All I knew was that all well-to-do businessmen we see around were not real, they were not the make believes they seemed to be. They were dirty and they left dirty trails behind them through kickbacks, organized crime, corruption, and cults behind their success.

Despite the temptation to accept Uncle Job's offer I felt that I needed to stand my ground.

Just say it, the rogue inside me prodded.

"I don't want your offer," I said. "I won't work for you."

I was about to say that I already knew how he had gotten his wealth after his wife robbed him of everything and fled to another country with her lover, whom she had been cheating on him with, but something held my tongue.

"I want to study first."

Uncle Job and Dad exchanged looks and well ... they were stunned. Whatever they were thinking I couldn't know, but I guessed they thought I was more stupid than they thought.

"I will go to university. I am sorry to say that I am not interested and not ready to take a job now."

"Ken!"

I had to leave there and then because I could see what was coming next. I rose from my seat, walked past them, and went to the outhouse.

As I left the house, I heard my father say, "Just leave it to me, Job. He will come around."

I wanted to storm back to the house and tell them that I was not going to change my mind, but I decided otherwise.

I had nowhere else to run to but my room, so I lay on my bed.

The minute Uncle Job left, Father stormed into the room.

CHAPTER 2

"KEN, DID YOU HAVE TO be rude to your uncle? How mouldy of you? What kind of person are you? Don't you even have a little respect for visitors even if you've *none* for me?"

I was mute, listening.

"Listen to me, and listen well. There is no way under any circumstance you are going to conduct yourself like that in this house. Now, tomorrow you must go and apologize to your uncle and ..."

I did not stir.

"Are you listening to me?"

I stared through him.

"You are going to take the job, come rain or sunshine. My mind is made up."

I sprang up out of bed with speed that startled him. I stared at him with a sneer, my heart throbbing. I was burning with such hate I was afraid I'd melt.

Thoughts clogged my mind like threads in a thick drapery, feeling like a hare ready to challenge the lion to a duel.

"My mind is also made up," I said.

The slap across my face got me by surprise. I lost my balance but tried not to fall. Stars twinkled in the darkness of my blurred vision. When the fuzziness cleared, my nose was bleeding, dripping small pockmarks on the floor. I closed my eyes, clenched my fists and before I could do anything that I would regret later I stormed out.

There was nothing in my past life that I could thank Dad for.

In my past life, that's what I thought as I walked to nowhere in particular.

Time and again he had interfered with my plans. Only a year-and-a-half before he had objected to my studying criminology and instead ended up sending me to a slum college in Thika to study Certified Public Accounts.

"What? You want to be a criminal?" he had asked me, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

My efforts to convince him were futile. All my pleas landed on deaf ears and I knew better than to push further. I ended up with a diploma in CPA and Computer Operations. Despite all my father had done for me up to now, I could not thank him. It never occurred to me that he was preparing me for Uncle Job's job.

I hated him with passion for the mere fact that he kept getting his way.

It was time I did it my way.

*

"So what?" a familiar voice said in the distance. "*University! University!* What does he know of University? Nonsense. *I*

am going to the University, I am going to the University’. Let me come. You will know this home is mine, and nobody should question what I say. Aeeh! So, a little thing like you can tell me, *‘My mind is also made up.’* We shall see.”

My father was back. It was his custom to drink himself to a stupor once he felt he was losing grip on something, or somebody. The alcohol gave him the guts to tell the whole world that he had, ahem, balls.

“Njeri! Njeri! I have come.”

No response came from Mother. I know she just frowned and pulled the blanket over her head and continued to sleep or pretended to be.

“This is my home. I am in charge here ... Aeeeh! So, that boy has the balls to tell me, *‘my mind is made up?’* I will show him. No one should question my stand on any issue.”

I checked my bedside clock.

It was 11:30 p.m.

Some days I felt like beating the hell out of my father to teach him a lesson. How dare he disgrace us? Howling our family affairs across the ‘hood, spoiling our family name. Instead, I did nothing. I lay in bed, listening to him rant.

“Njeri! Njeri! I’m back. Do you think I’m drunk? No. You are wrong. I only tasted. Open the door for me.”

Dad was a primary school teacher. He ensured we had what we needed despite his drinking problem. However, Mom supplemented what Dad provided from the *shamba*.

After the altercation earlier in the day, I had gone to my friend's house, needing to talk to someone. By the time I got back home, I knew that I still needed my father.

As my father's drunken rants pierced the night and disturbed the neighbourhood, I decided to block everything, and everybody, out.

Block out the world.

Block out the worries.

Listen to myself.

Don't even think about him, I told myself.

The whole world was now me, myself and I.

CHAPTER 3

JOB, A LITTLE DAPPLED MAN with sandpaper hair and cat eyes, sat behind a Dell desktop computer watching the activities in the supermarket. He liked watching. That was how his life had been for the past few years.

Job's desk was on a small balcony inside the supermarket. He was pleased with the sea of humanity moving around inside the building. With every minute of the hour, he licked his lips, moistening them. Business was good.

A trio of beauties dressed in tight jeans and revealing tops entered the supermarket via the exit door, distracting Job. Why people didn't follow simple instructions was a mystery to him. But seeing the young women reminded him of the one person he did not like thinking about.

His mind drifted off to that fateful day when hell broke loose and plummeted on him like a meteorite. He had thought he had lost everything and life was worthless, but his friend's voice reminded him that there was still a long way to go.

Where there is muck there's brass. That was what his friend in Customs told him.

Within few months he was up again, but this time round Job vowed that the Graces of this world will never come near him. Women with names synonymous to the qualities attributed to God were devil incarnates. Mercy, Faith, Grace,

and all. He swore to kill Grace himself with bare hands, but it was as though Grace had gone off the face of the earth. But this did not mean that he did not salivate for her blood—she had to pay, someday, someday. And if she would have transited over to the next world he will torment her soul forever.

From afar, Job heard something crawling on the table. His hairs stood erect: crawling animals freaked him out, blame it on childhood experiences. He almost laughed when he realized it was his phone vibrating.

Job glanced at the caller ID. Beads of cold sweat formed on his brow as he answered the call. Samson never called unless there was something burning.

*

Ending his call, Samson focused on driving. He drove his new toy, a Nissan X-Trail, warily, eyes fixed on the road, his fingers fiddling with the miniature statue of St. Philomena hanging from the ignition.

Samson was young, intelligent, wealthy, and handsome. He checked his wristwatch. He was also always on time. The meeting he was attending was important. He needed to be there on time to make sure everything was all right.

The meeting was at the Hilton Hotel. His suggestion. Job never wanted to attract attention, he hated cosy venues. The last time they had met, Job insisted on a very grimy restaurant in one of the grimmest places in the capital. The air was stinky, acrid, and pungent. Samson endured. When the meeting ended, he told Job never again would they meet in such a place.

To hell with your low profile nonsense, Job, Samson thought.

At the Hilton Hotel, Samson, a.k.a Sam, found his personal assistant, who was doubling as the secretary, already there.

Mandy was the parlour-wife type of lady: sweet, subservient, and beautiful.

“Hi Sam, it has been a long day.”

“Sure. I think you’ve already had several pizzas on my dime?”

“What do you take me for ...?”

“Easy, easy Mandy. You always tell me that I have a very dry sense of humour. Call them crude jokes ...”

They had boundaries though.

“Have you *painted* the whole room?”

He used painting to mean bugging. Samson did not trust his associates. He always taped their discussions as insurance in case of trouble.

“Yes ... you are going to trust that I would do anything you tell me to.”

“Of course ...” he was already going through the whole room. “Job should be here in ten minutes.”

“Are you going to tell him the truth?”

“About what?”

"Do not play classified stuff with me, Sam. I am your PA for God's sake."

"I'll brief you later."

"Things are changing with you these days. Are you seeing somebody ...?"

"Mandy ..."

"Make sure I'm still the one ... your *personal assistant* that is."

"It's almost time, Mandy. You have to go now. I have something to do before the meeting."

"And you will not need *personal assistance*?"

Tone down that sarcasm, babe, Samson thought.

"Honest to God, Mandy, if I was a killer you would be my first kill."

He then gave her his devastating smile that made not only her but all women drool.

As though you haven't killed me a thousand times with that smile, Mandy thought as she took her handbag from the conference table.

There was an incoming call, one of the G8 members. He flipped open the flap phone and listened.

Everything was going as planned, like a dream.

I hope to God Job takes the bait, Samson thought as he disconnected the call.

A moment later, Job walked in accompanied by somebody Samson dreaded. The intruder's presence left him wondering what Job was trying to do. Job was beginning to open his eyes, to learn the rules of the game, but at an alarmingly fast rate.

Samson doubted whether the intruder was really a threat or was just subtle. With Job he had no worry, but not with *him*. They had run into each other severally. Job was supposed to come alone. Job beginning to know the unwritten rules was not good for business, Sam decided.

CHAPTER 4

LATER THAT EVENING, SOMEWHERE IN Nairobi, a man was avidly lying in wait in the shadows. He checked his wrist watch.

It was about time.

His orders were clear—hijack (rob nothing, harm no one); drive off and report immediately that the cargo is delivered and safe at the designated location ... and *no mistakes*.

In the short period of time remaining, he thought of what lay ahead of him. He had always wanted to please Urbanas.

This was the only way to prove himself after the mistakes during his last assignment. He had begged and Urbanas had given him another chance to atone.

He thought of how life in crime was for him so far. It was not as the movies made it look like. Every time there was another operation, his heart began the countdown to his grave. He wanted a place in the gang, part of him craved it. However, the gang took him a piece at a time. Every week Urbanas pushed him slightly further, and he was intent on proving to the gang that he was capable of doing what was required of him. Still, his mind supplied visions of hell, relayed jail scenes, police brutality, and his soul's torment by the devil himself.

He grew up on the streets, every lane and alley was etched in his head with a sharp knife, scored in deep like some strange work of art. Nonetheless, during his last assignment he was on the down low, his heart palpitating out of his chest, beating free of its cage. The police were on the streets, hunting for the likes of him, marking out their turf like a pack of wolves. The police meant business, to make the city safe. The Minister for Internal Security had directed them to 'Shoot to kill first, ask questions later'. He did not even alert his friends. He left with the getaway car.

But what can I do? He asked himself. No-one goes to a monster for help unless it's their only option.

From a distance, he heard the roar of a vehicle.

It must be her.

He checked everything to make sure all was in order; the ambush set.

A sports car halted before huge iron gates, dimmed the lights and ... the gates refused to open electrically. He smiled. *One-nil.*

From his hiding place he saw the driver, *the woman*, get out of the car and walk to the gate. No doubt she wondered why the gates would not respond to her remote control. There were lights in the house ... she tried the doorbell. It was dead, too—*two-nil.*

He struck with the ferocity of a cat, not giving her time to scream or yell for help.

No mistakes.

Mistakes were not allowed.

Cargo was secured, mission accomplished.

CHAPTER 5

NOBODY TOLD ME THAT MY brother was dead. But I knew long before it was a well-known fact. I saw people coming and going to offer their condolences.

Neighbours came and gave money, their contributions recorded in a book that was kept by one of the village elders. Mournful words were shared. Others offered to do the chores—washing the utensils, cleaning the house and the compound, tending to the cattle, and many other domestic duties. In addition, the family radio played gospel songs: those popular ones sang by the Emali Town choir, Kyande, Munishi, the *Twawaombea* hit song, and *Nilianza Safari*.

I did not cry, though.

In Africa, death is a taboo. People do not talk about it. They talk about death when it has occurred. Death in Africa is considered a bad act, a frightening happening that calls for retribution and punishment. I was in constant state of denial.

I was surprised to discover that I was not alone. There were those in the family who felt that Danny's death had come a little too early, that it was not in natural order he died that young. They sought to punish the killer. A secret fact finding team led by my granny consulted a witchdoctor who told them Danny had been bewitched by an aunt.

I was never told the truth, though. I happened to stumble on the doctor's diagnosis report by mistake three years later. Though I did not understand it then, let alone read the illegible handwriting, I got one word which was repeated. When I researched it later when I grew up, I understood that the globe of light that was in Danny's right eye was not exactly what it had been taken to be, what had been neglected. It was retinoblastoma; cancer of the eye. It could have been treated had it not been neglected. Over the years, it had spread to other body parts, causing osteogenic sarcoma, a malignant bone tumour.

He was a good brother. I loved him though I never told him so or admitted it to myself in his lifetime. We were sworn natural enemies, ever fighting.

Duncan and I grew up together. We only knew one person ... *our elderly mother, granny*. She taught us how to live the hard way.

She taught *us* that we were sons of man.

She taught *us* how to live.

She taught me how to live.

An unrelenting knocking on the door hurtled me back to the present. It was my sister, June. She was carrying a DL khaki envelope. She gave it to me and turned to go. I did not have to ask her where it had come from.

The envelope had the Nashville University logo and seal.

*

"Why don't you say you understand, Mother?" I said.

"We all want the best for you. I know you can't see that now, but believe me, we have your best interests at heart."

I felt like strangling her. How could she say that?

Not again, Mom.

"Mom, we've been through this already. I need you to talk to him. I must go and the scholarship does not cater for my upkeep."

"You should listen to your *father*..."

"I see *you* all don't understand," I said. "Don't you think of me as your son?"

She flinched.

"How could you say such a thing? *We* all love you ..."

"Then why don't *you* give me what I want if *you* really love me?" I asked.

For a brief moment I weighed what she had said—Love.

She did not love me. Not according to my definition of love at the moment. Wasn't she the one who denied me when she gave birth to me? I had heard it through my grandmother during one of her infamous bouts of anger.

'You never wanted this child,' Granny stated, so matter of fact, it had to be true. *'You denied him after birth and left him with me for year. Then you went ahead and brought me another one later. My home is not a children's home ...'*

"We will never wish you any ill. We want all the best for you. Why don't you see that?"

"Sometimes I wonder whether I am really *your* son ..."

The shock on her face was evident.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked.

I said nothing.

Silence ensued.

"Mom, I am sorry. It's just ..."

"It's okay. I understand."

I met her gaze. There in her eyes I saw something I had not seen in a long time, a wide ocean of unconditional love. And she was calling to me to swim as much as I wanted in that ocean. So, I did something I had never done.

I hugged her.

Her muscles tensed. In that brusque hug all the boundaries were broken. Mother and son were united for the first time.

Then she began to withdraw, her hands where her breasts had been on my chest. For an instant, I felt that I loved her and no one else.

"Kennedy, my son, I am scared. Your father is sick."

The weight of what my mother said took time to sink in. Nevertheless, despite my wanting to be there for her, to reach out and console her, I found her words had no effect on me.

Yes, Dad could be sick, but I wondered what that had to do with me. Was he not the one who, indirectly, used to show me that I was not his son?

“Ken, please, listen to me. When a child is well-behaved, obedient and subservient, the child becomes the father’s child because he feels flattered and proud when saying, ‘my son or daughter is like this or that.’ But if the child turns out to be a spoiled brat or a hard-core, he or she becomes the mother’s child, because we mothers are the ones who bring *you* up.”

I wanted to blurt out she wasn’t talking sense. I was ready to be disowned, clouted, and even cursed but I held my tongue.

“Mom, I know that, but it’s difficult for me to understand why he can’t help me get what I want. Just for once, Mom, talk to him. What do I have now? Papers of courses I never wanted. Whenever I put across what my heart desires, all I get is *‘my mind is made up ... you are taking this ... you are taking that ...’* How long am I going to live like this? I want my life.”

“I told you your father is sick. Don’t pile so much on him, please ...”

I cared for Mom’s happiness, and I never wanted to hurt her feelings. She understood me, better than anyone else, and I was free and close to her more than I was with *Dad* who was free with *his* daughters.

Dad never managed to have a son of his own, and that is how I came to have many sisters. My parents kept trying to have a son of their own.

“Kennedy, I do not want to say ...” she began.

“Don’t worry,” I said before she went further. “Very soon you are not going to have anything to say.”

CHAPTER 6

EVERYWHERE WAS THE AQUA BLUE of the ocean. The smell of the coast was the smell of fish scales and seaweed.

Lying supine on a mattress on the floor of the boat, that we had hired at the hotel, was my beloved in a Polka dot bikini. Her small bust heaved up and down rhythmically. For an instant, I thought of the sweat-slicked love we made. I could not fight the urge to kiss her pouty lips. I bent to kiss her and then ... I woke up.

I checked my watch. It was 1:30 a.m. The dream was recurring. I loved her, wanted to be with her.

Her name was Kate.

I was about to declare my feelings to Kate when the devil spoiled everything. Pauline popped up and ruined the plan.

Pauline was angelic, she looked like a painting of the Virgin Mary. Her family was well-off: her mother was the principal of our school. Pauline thought that the world revolved around her. Worse, she felt all she had to do was sneeze and the whole world would beat a path to her door.

The news that Pauline was in love with me took me by surprise. She used a proxy to tell me, handing a note to her secret admirer, who then handed it to Kate.

So, when I told Kate there was nothing between Pauline and me, she didn't believe me. Kate told me about the letter that I never saw and told me to stay away from her the way they do it in movies.

Pauline's beau, and my friend, Ralph, got mad at me for trying to snatch his girlfriend. Pauline's secret admirer was Ralph's friend. He told Randolph of *my liaison* with Pauline. That was the end of my friendship with Ralph.

Since then, I kept on dreaming and hoping that one day Kate would forget the primary school bullshit and take me back to the realm of her heart.

Seven years, and still counting, was a long time.

I always dreamt of her, that one day we will be.

Now this night it was her again.

*

The ride to Thika town the following day was the shortest ever because I was thinking of Kate, and the *matatu* that I took was almost flying. It was that time of the month when avaricious drivers took advantage of the end of month rush risking macabre road carnage.

On alighting I did not waste time. I went straight to Thika Arcade where Kate's parents operated a cybercafé. Kate worked from lunch to evening, helping her mother.

I saw Kate before she saw me. She was helping out a customer log into the University of Nairobi student portal.

The first thing that caught me by surprise was her beauty. The last time I saw her she did not have the aura of a Da

Vinci's *La Gioconda*. Her chubby cheeks exuded a radiance that shone in the whole room, cheekbones well-formed as though it was Michelangelo himself who was sculpting them, and her eyes were gibbous orbs of beauty and glamour.

I had not seen Kate since leavers' bash after completing our end of primary school exams. She went to the Coast over the long December holidays. When she came back I had already joined the seminary. The seminary's program never coincided with that of other schools; so we had not met for almost seven years. After completing high school she went to stay with her cousin who was in the military at the Coast.

Kate was barely a week since she had come back.

The encounter was rather awkward, but I understood. The place and space did not permit for hugs. We exchanged pleasantries meant to be the warmest mode of reunion of potential lovers who had not seen each other in almost seven years.

I told her how much I had missed her.

Let her disapprove of me, I said to myself.

She led me to the cashier's desk and asked I wait for her there while she finished with customers. The tone of her voice when she asked me to wait made me optimistic.

When she got time, we talked for hours, remembering *our* primary and high school days with nostalgia; never discussing our past relationship. After all, we were just kids then.

I then told her what I needed from her, and why. She agreed to help me out. *Just like that.*

“Come to our place tomorrow and I will see what I can do.”

There were no words as promising as those ever said to me.

“Won’t you be coming to work tomorrow?” I asked.

“If I want to. I’m only keeping busy here as I wait to go to college.”

“College?”

“Yep. I didn’t secure an entrance to the university.”

“I see. What would you be doing?”

“Kuuza njugu,” she answered with a mischievous smile.

“You know what I’m asking.”

“Get my CPS licence. I want to become a certified public secretary. Dad recommended it. He says it’s a good job to do.”

“Your choice,” I said, suddenly uninterested. I didn’t want to corrupt her obeisance mind with my *‘children should be allowed to choose what they want’* thinking. “So you won’t be in town tomorrow?”

“Because of you,” she said and winked at me.

I would have given anything for her to wink at me again.

“I will be at home, *alone*. Mom will be going to church and Dad has a meeting in Nairobi.”

I thanked Kate for listening to me and then left.

“Well, how did it go?” I asked Mother the minute I got home.

“Nothing. He was not even moved, but I will still try harder to talk to him.”

A lump lodged in my throat. Even after reading the scholarship letter Dad was not moved? Damn him. I wanted to die that very minute.

“I am terribly sorry, son ... he did not even read the letter.”

He did not even read the letter?

I swallowed hard and turned to leave.

“I am sorry, son, but I promise I will—”

“I am sorry too, Mom.”

I left without looking back.

CHAPTER 7

DON'T WORRY, BROTHER. IT WILL be alright."

"How long am I going to wait for it to be alright? I want my life."

"We've been through this together."

"Together? You know, sometimes you astonish me. For God's sake, you are not real. You are a phantasm."

"That's not fair. How could you call me that?"

"But that's what you are. You are not real."

"Don't you see? I'm real to you. I have always been. I am experiencing what you are experiencing."

"Look here, Danny. I have a life to live, you have no life. You are a dream."

"Dream? I never believed in dreams. You are becoming so rude. You call me a phantasm, then a dream ..."

"Because that's what you are. If you aren't, why do you keep wearing the same clothes you were wearing the last time I saw you, and the time before that?"

"You don't understand. In this life everything is perfect, but your life is full of imperfections."

"If that's so, why haven't you grown up?"

Laughter.

"What's funny now?"

"Brother, you never saw me any other way. You always took me to be the small boy you used to boss around. Can't you see I am a grownup now?"

"You know, ghostly nature has given you a dry sense of humour."

"Now you crack my ribs, Brother. I came to tell you not to worry. Everything is going to be alright."

"I don't want to be given hope against hope."

"You are so pessimistic. You haven't changed. By the way, that girl, what's her name? Kelly? Oh! Kate? She's a piece."

"What do you know of girls, Danny?"

"More than you, big bro."

"Please, give me a break."

"Not this time. You should know that we belong together, Brother. There's no need of living in rivalry."

"You are right, little brother."

"Now, would you mind telling me more about this Kate?"

"Yes, I mind."

"Come on, Brother, it's just the two of us, sons of man."

"Don't go there. You never gave a damn."

"But I do now."

"I don't want to talk about Kate."

"A little banter isn't bad, Bro. I will tell you about my Kate. She's called Lavender. I call her Lav."

"You are very insistent. I flatly say NO in capital letters."

"You will never change, Brother."

"If you say so."

"I gotta go ... next time I will come with Lav. And stop fretting over nothing. Everything is going to be alright ..."

He was gone before I could say anything.

I woke up feeling a little fuzzy as always when I dreamt of my brother. Time to get moving. I was meeting Kate today.

CHAPTER 8

MARRY ME, KEN; MARRY ME, Ken.

The song replayed over and over though it was so distant.

Marry me, Ken; marry me, Ken.

She remembered where she had heard it. It was the theme song from the Nigerian drama movie, *Guardian Angel*, starring Nigeria's ladies' man, Nouah Ramsey as Ken.

Jeez! She had watched that movie right before going to bed. It was her ritual to watch at least one movie before going to bed. Now she was dreaming about it.

She woke up with a start, instantly glad she was not in a corn field, or in a *Guardian Angel* movie scene. She was in her room, in her bed. No fictitious Ken or the real Nouah Ramsey.

I hate dreams. They never come true.

She shimmied on culottes and a Celtel Kenya T-shirt and went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. She always made breakfast when she was home. Her mother never woke up early to make breakfast when she had a *big* daughter around.

To her surprise, her mother was already in the kitchen preparing pancakes.

Whatever got her today?

"Good morning, Mom."

"Morning. You overslept and I decided not to wake you up."

"What time is it?"

"It's already eight. You slept late last night."

"Sorry, Mom ..."

"Sorry for what? You too need to relax."

Kate smiled.

Mother is always happier on Saturdays, especially when Dad is around.

Kate started setting the table for breakfast. As she set the placemats, she told her mother that she wanted to spend the day at home.

"Who will be at the cyber café, Kathy?"

"I told Sheila to take care of the cyber. I am not feeling well."

"The hell you are not feeling well ... and you slept past midnight?"

"Mom, please..."

"She's still young, Kathy."

"But she's been doing it when I was away."

"Only on holidays, but now you are here. You should work with her."

“Just today, Mom. I need some rest.”

“What have you done to need rest, Katherine? This is not Mombasa ...”

“But Mom, I was not idle.”

“Says the person who spent all her time at the beach. I understand at the barracks there’s a beach. You did not need to go looking for it.”

“Mum, please, let me stay today.”

Her mother cooked in silence for a few minutes, then gave a short sigh.

“Fine, but only today, tomorrow you’ll need to clean the cyber after church.”

After breakfast, Sheila announced that she was leaving. Kate blew her sister a kiss as Sheila left. Three hours later, her parents gone to work, Kate was alone in the house.

The memories crept up on her. Kate realized then that, despite the seven years apart, she had not gotten over the shock. She was planning to surprise Ken that year’s Valentine’s Day with a present. Then Randolph’s friend, Mose, showed her the letter written to Ken by her friend Pauline and the world came to a standstill. She had liked Ken then, and wanted to be with him.

Kate remembered, hoping and praying that Ken was not ‘dating’ with her best friend.

Thinking about it now made her nostalgic. She wanted to go back to those old days with Ken, to be his lover and not

his friend. She smiled and wondered if it wasn't time she invaded the world of boys.

She decided then that she would help Ken with what he needed.

CHAPTER 9

THE SUN WAS FIERCE AND scorching. Dry sweat beaded on my face, and from time to time I dabbed it with the hanky that my little sis', Stephanie Nyambura, had given me the previous Easter holiday. I hoped Kate would do what she had promised.

I arrived at Kate's house to find her waiting. She looked pretty in a flared miniskirt, a sleeveless top, and matching anklets.

She wrapped me in a firm lingering hug and welcomed me *to feel at home*. The sweet fragrance of frangipani wafted up to me. In her embrace, I felt like I held the future. When she pulled away, I felt like a car being towed away.

She led the way into the living room, and served me with orange juice in a white wine wineglass.

"I am setting the table for lunch."

"Okay," I said, taking the glass and sipping the orange juice.

While she worked in the dining room, I feasted my eyes on the photos hanging on the walls. The last time I'd been in this living room, Kate and I were revising for the last K.C.P.E paper.

Lunch was boiled Pearl rice served with beef stew. After lunch, we lounged on the couch watching an afternoon

show on the KTN TV channel. It was not long before I realized that I was no longer watching the TV. I was watching Kate who sat across me.

Her short skirt left her thighs exposed. I liked what I saw but I did not like what it did to me, what was slowly crawling into my mind. I tried to push it back to the dark recesses of my mind to no avail. Kate's luscious thighs were seductive and tempting.

The more I tried to suppress the feeling, the more I failed. The devil on my left shoulder convinced me to start hatching a plan on how to get her out of her clothes.

What if she refuses?

A kind of a sadistic thought crossed my mind.

We are just the two of us, who will know if I force her?

That is not manly. It is immoral, unethical, a voice whispered back.

As though Kate had noticed that I was no longer watching the TV, and she was doing it on purpose, she opened her legs, a slight elegant movement, revealing pink lingerie.

Kinky!

My body automatically switched to ready mode and at the same time upped the alert to amber.

She said something I did not hear.

Temptations are the devil and he's coming for you ...

I studied her: her long tawny-black hair, her Madonna face, the gelatinous orbs of beauty, chubby cheeks, thick fleshy lips, neckline like a watchtower, rhythmically moving bust, the tummy, and the region just above the belt line ... she was incredibly tempting. She shone with the glamour of innocence.

And then I saw again: the Garden of Eden.

At that instance, the light in my head turned red.

I began to tumescent, to wake up from my twenty years' sleep like Rip Van Winkle.

When you think like this ... when you think like that ... when she looks at you like this ... when she looks at you like that ...

She too was studying me, or so I thought.

I knew that things might get messy, even messier, and the thought occurred to me to walk away from the impending disaster and mistake, but the passion was so scalding. I did not want to, and the devil on my left shoulder whispered, *'it's damn sweet. They all lie to you ... you'll have the desire of your desire ... the truth all of them do not want you to know'.*

I moved closer to Kate.

I placed my hand on her lap. She did not move, or push it away. She did not even flinch.

It started without knowing. We were weird, and quirky.

I was doing a million and one things, she too.

She started to moan and arch into me.

We stared at each other. It felt like forever since we last saw each other.

The next minute our lips locked, her lips velvet soft. Then the next moment we were naked.

My hands were everywhere. The die was cast. Instinctively, she parted her legs and I did not need to be told what to do.

Kate was impenetrable but we did manage helping each other through. She writhed beneath me, wriggled her hips, scratched my back, and held me tight to her. It was asphyxiating. I felt her legs around me. More squirming. And then the climax came so fast.

That was it. Less than five minutes. I fell on top of her with an inexplicable sigh.

She pushed me slowly from atop her, created room for me on the sofa, and snuggled. Her eyes had a radiance I had not seen before.

A long quiet followed.

An hour later, we dressed. I did not want to look her in the eye. She too avoided my eyes.

She had made me a winner.

I had made her a sinner.

*

Two days later, I sat outside the cubicle that was my house doing nothing but watching the stars at night. It felt satisfying.

In the millions of stars in the black of the night sky I saw hope. So many light years away, a small star twinkled at me each time with an increasing intensity.

I was so absorbed by the aura of being with nature that I did not see that the moon, a big yellow plate, had risen, rendering an eerie glow to Mother Earth.

I had no intention of sleeping, though. Not this night. Not before accomplishing my mission. It was today or *never*. The plan was in motion. I refused to stay captive in my parents' home. I wouldn't. I would go and keep going and pretend that I had no family, no home, I had decided. Keep going and never look back.

Of course I would come back when I had made it in life, to gloat to Dad, but right now, I had to leave.

It was already one in the morning. The wind had cracked my lips, my cheeks flushed, and my eyes stung from the brisk rush of the air. The light was still on in my parents' room. However, what I had been waiting for (lights off) came a moment later and my wait signal blinked green.

Twenty minutes later, I gave the place I had called home for almost two decades one last look, carefully storing the memory. Even under the glow of the rising moon, my parents' home had an aura of wildness.

I am sure I will not miss you.

I entered my cubicle, grabbed my rucksack and walked into the night.

“There’s time and place for everything.”

“Don’t get dirty, *M*, you little gorgeous hunk of beauty.”

*

Long after midnight, I made my way to my house. It had been a nice evening, I had met many people; men and women I’d not have thought I’ll ever be near to in my lifetime.

I was feeling a little tired, worn out and drained, and I needed fresh air.

I went upstairs and instead of going to the bedroom to succumb to slumber-bog, I threw off the dinner jacket and loosened the tie and went to the terrace.

The terrace was spacious, overlooked the lido and the flower gardens, and the impeccably mown leas that surrounded Shalom’s estate.

At that very moment, a strange kind of feeling engulfed me. I felt as though I was beginning to enjoy the little liberties that life was offering me, thanks to Hanan and his family.

The night was dark, cloudless and starry. The cool night breeze carried all my worries with it to wherever they were stowed away.

I fell into some kind of a weird and wonderful state, my mind wandering. I went to the balustrade overlooking the gardenias and frangipani; and the aroma of the frangipani filled my nose.

It was a sweet night. I liked it. Despite all my worries I felt free of everything, free of any responsibility.

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Vincent de Paul is the author of ten books, including three collections of flash fiction—*Flashes of Vice*—and four poetry collections. *Twisted Times: Son of Man* is his first novel.

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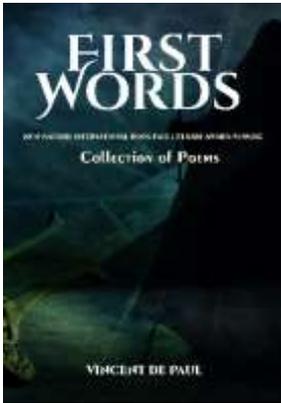
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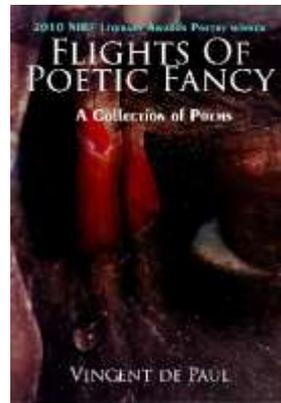
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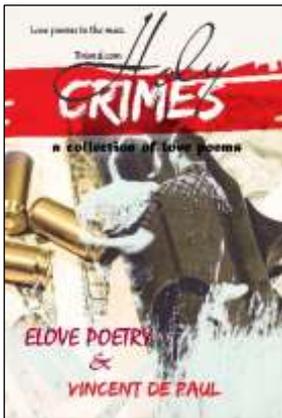
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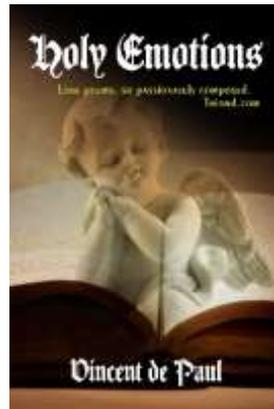
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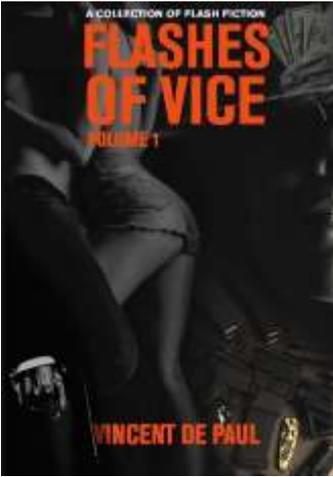
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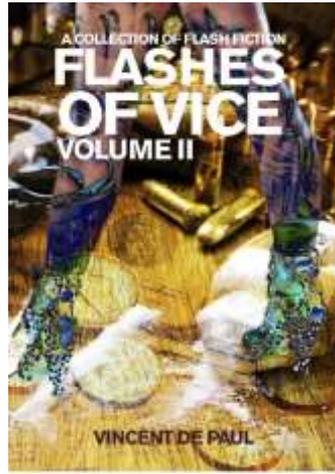
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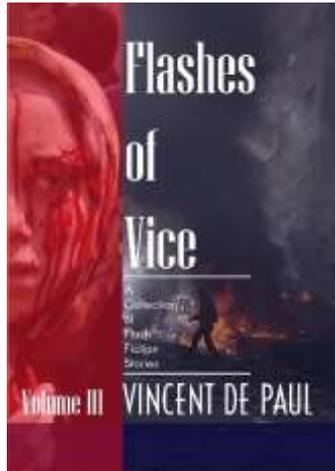
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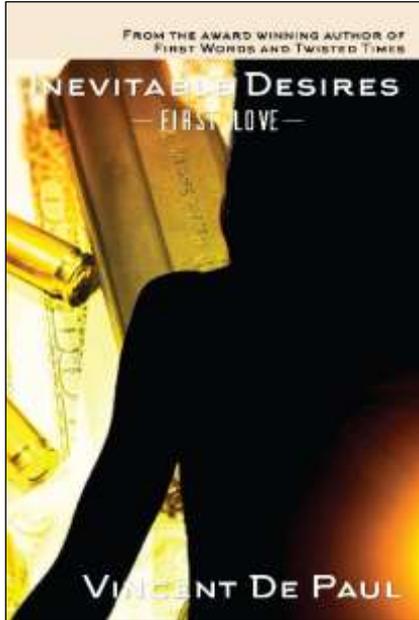


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