

**CITY OF
CANNIBALS**

a novella

DANCAN OUMA OBUYA

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MYSTERY BOOKS

City of Cannibals

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This book is for all learners, friends, and readers.

CHAPTER ONE

CANNIBAL CITY KEPT up with the developmental pace of major cities in the eastern bloc of the black continent. River Cannibal meandered through the city, a disappointed feature. The river, which the city was named after many decades ago, used to be the only source of clean water that served residents of the city and its neighbourhood.

The weather in the city and its environs was warm and the rain patterns predictable.

City dwellers used River Cannibal's banks for recreation activities. The faithful confided in its magical water for solace during their tempting moments: watching the river flow gave them strength to move on and courage to face challenges. River Cannibal was their home of refuge for a long time.

That was before the city's sprinting growth corrupted its water and continued to do so; and then the river was perturbed by the intentions of the city and its dwellers.

The city welcomed factories that threw up their waste into the river day in and day out and, as such, River Cannibal turned its back on the users. Its water was no longer safe even for *chokoras* to bathe in to

mention the least—they said it made them itchy and sick.

The river was mad at the city for betraying the trust they had shared before.

I was pondering over the city's river when I received a letter from my father, Aradi:

Dear son,

I am writing this letter hoping you are doing well. Your mother and I are fine here at home. Our cow, Openda, gave birth to twin calves recently and we have a lot of milk.

I am coming to the city to attend your cousin, okil Rose's annual celebration party; the one she organises to bring together her colleagues and family members. I have never been to any party before. Please inform her and her brother, Kerry, that I will be in attendance. I have no doubt you are aware of the upcoming party.

While there, I will take you somewhere, along River Cannibal. It is so dear to me. I used to go there whenever I felt sad.

I hope the city has not swallowed your morals. It had an allurements of its kind that captivated and held us back from visiting the village during our days in the city. Those tall storey buildings should not make you forget home; you haven't visited us for a long while.

Every day, there are announcements on the radio about the world's best architects constructing double highways in the city. I also heard that the best railway in the world has been constructed, linking Cannibal City and the coastal towns, and is yet to extend to Kasiasa. Is that true? Cannibal must be boasting about its new self!

Rumours also have it that a double-decker road (that reminds me of a double-decker bus—Stage Coach) is yet to be constructed through the heart of the city. Others say it is already done. What is the truth, son?

Anyway, I am coming to witness everything for myself.

You will take me to many recreational places within the city.

Remember to send my transport money, please.

Take care of yourself. I love you so much, son.

*Sincerely,
Your Dad.*

At the age of twenty-seven, I did not have much affluence. I was my father's only child in the city. Brought up in a pastoral locality, I yearned to live in Cannibal—a city that was praised like heaven. In school, teachers urged us to work hard and make it to the city where people drove big cars and money existed in plenty.

After finishing high school, I pleaded with Father to take me to a driving school in preparation for the city life. Father approved of my request, and I came to the city a qualified driver. Father was glad that his son pursued a course in driving and was employed by a rich man from Thaiga Estate, whom I drove to and from work upon his alerts.

I rented a *kaunda* house (one made with iron sheets on the walls and roof) at Jonsaga for three thousand five hundred shillings a month. Jonsaga was only three kilometres away from Thaiga, and Thaiga was three kilometres from town where my boss's office was located. This meant that we wouldn't be stuck in traffic jam for long.

In his youthful days, Father worked as a security guard under a renowned firm in Cannibal for ten years. He was later transferred to Kasiasa, our home town, which is about four hundred and fifty kilometres from Cannibal City. Since he left the city, when I was about five years old, he had not returned.

Back in the village in Kasiasa, Father reared large herds of cattle, goats and sheep, part of which he sold to settle his personal and children's necessities, including my high school education and later my driving course. My siblings, Abel and Abisalom—who stopped schooling after primary eight and form two respectively—and I used to look after the animals whenever schools closed and before I moved to the city.

Finally, Father was returning to Cannibal City to grace his niece's occasion after a long time.

I sent Father's fare through the post office three days after receiving his letter. He did not trust mobile money transfer. When he arrived in my house one morning, having travelled through the night, he began:

“Buildings have grown so tall in Cannibal! I thought the taxi was driving me back to the village on my way here—a place I had stayed all during my life in the city. Everything looked new and exaggerated. The city has really transformed.”

I had to plead with a friend who ran a taxi business to drive Father to my house, at Jonsaga, because I had woken up too exhausted to go to town. I would be paying for the ride in instalments.

“You don't mean it, Dad. I don't see anything new,” I responded.

“That's because you are yesterday's child. A lot is new, my son. By the way, what have you people done to River Cannibal, the only source of the city's clean water? I was surprised when I saw it. Could it be that a new river was born and River Cannibal sank? It is shameful how the river is polluted!” Father added.

“What are you talking about? River Cannibal has been useless since I can remember. Everyone is used to it that way.”

“That is where you get it all wrong. It was the only source of clean water for the city. And not everyone is used to its current state; dirty runoffs from estates pour into it! Why has the Governor not taken action against factories directing untreated chemicals to the river? If it were our time, we’d blame it on the City Council had any issues arose. There are more factories emitting poisonous smoke today than in the past! I doubt rain water here is safe like in the village.”

“Don’t worry, Father. There is nothing we can do about it.”

“There is something we can do, Son. At this point, it’s too much. And tell me, I saw a funny storey building, walled with iron sheets, erected only a metre away from the river bank! Why are people risking others’ lives these days? That was not acceptable before. What is wrong with today’s city dwellers? Human life was safeguarded during our days, unlike today. Look at the weather! The sun is just waking up yet it is hot already!”

Fried eggs with a loaf of bread spread with blue-band, Father’s favourite, served with hot coffee marked our heavy breakfast. Father was full when the last drop of coffee poured from the thermos flask. He then dozed off.

I accompanied Father to a famous recreation park at the heart of the city later in the day, ahead of Rose’s party the next day. He did not wish to stay indoors like a prisoner.

While in town, he kept looking outside the *matatu* windows with something to say about what he saw.

“The city is so dirty despite its modern roads, especially that superhighway we left behind. What did you call it? Theka? Look at those beautiful buildings ahead of us. A thick bush used to be where they are standing. I have never seen a building so tall and beautiful!” Father commented as we watched UAP Towers from Haile Selassie Avenue.

“You have not seen it all, Dad. You are yet to witness more of the drama,” I said.

“Women nowadays walk half-naked unlike in the past. Look at that lady! Don’t tell me you intend to marry one like her. I want you to be choosy and wise. Look at her transparent dress! She is pulling it down yet she wanted men to admire her! Don’t fall prey to their bait,” Father advised.

“I have been keen all my life. I learned from the story of the good hunter you told me on the eve of my journey to the city. You narrated:

‘Once upon a time, there lived a hunter named Ageng’o. He was a sharpshooter and would always return with game whenever he went hunting in the forest. He could kill a variety of animals and took pride in his spear. He was good-hearted and shared his meat with unlucky hunters. One day, he went hunting but made no kill. His counterparts were lucky. They refused to share with him. Ageng’o became unhappy and swore never to share his meat with anyone again;

an oath which he honoured throughout the rest of his life. With time, each hunter went their separate way, leaving no room for friendship ever again.’ Once you were done, you explained—

“And how exactly did I explain?” he asked.

“You said, ‘My son! Walk with your third eye open, but hidden from the knowledge of city friends. They are not far from the selfish hunters’.”

That was the extent to which Father feared for my stay in the city. He wanted me not to be corrupted by the city. He added that keeping to oneself was the best survival mechanism in the city.

“An excellent memory! It’s nice to learn from your elders. Something else that baffles me is the large number of these street children. What are they discussing now? Look at that one who resembles my friend Duke’s son. I hope they are not going to declare war on us.”

“Not at all, Father. Do not worry. They are not wild,” I answered.

“They used to be so wild during our time in this city. It is good if they have transformed for better,” he said.

“They are good people; friendly,” I told him.

“Alright then. And these cars are so many nowadays! Are they even moving? They remind me of my father’s large herds that could extend from Kipasi to Angalo,

villages two kilometres apart, paraded. I was only a boy. At what time are these cars going to reach their destinations? This is so unbearable! Where do people acquire the money to buy such cars? Some of these cars can cost up to a thousand lungs! And this one is in a hurry heading nowhere. You will find it parked outside a bar!” he said.

We stayed at The Park of Freedom where we took late lunch then left for my house late in the evening.

CHAPTER TWO

I ACCOMPANIED FATHER to Rose's party at Mamba Village Hotel early the next day. The venue was decorated to a ceremonial tune in white and pink. The cutlery and the waiters also danced to the colour tune.

Father and I greeted Rose and talked for a while before I excused myself—it had been long since they last met. I reached out to Kerry, Rose's younger brother, with whom we shared little before he left to pick up a guest from town. Father soon joined me at the tent.

Guests poured in; one after another. Entertainment was baked from live performances to traditional dances to modern music played by a DJ. Food was served in varieties, from time to time, and drinks topped it up.

Father was excited after downing a few bottles of beer. When this rhumba song, *Oberana* by John Junior, played, he lost himself to its tunes:

*Nyar Jaduong' nyathi josakwa jaber in e magenie
ngimana,
Nyar Jaduong' nyathi josakwa jaber in e magenie*

*gimana, Honey yoo tamiyo ngimana tee.
Tokendo in echunya oberana.
Honey yoo tamiyo ngimana tee.
Tokendo in echunya oberana.
Herana kionge paro be ng'eny
Mawazo gi kuyo lich ndi
Herana kionge paro be ng'eny
Mawazo gi kuyo lich ndi
Bibuta warit singowa mama
Nyar gi Lily aheri oberana.
Bibuta warit singowa mama
Nyar gi Lily aheri oberana...*

Father rose from his chair holding an old walking stick I had known all my life. Raising it, he swung his body as he sang along the lyrics, which he was very familiar with.

He entertained the crowd then sat back as soon as the song stopped.

There was nothing amusing to Father as showing his moves to a gathering like that whenever he was drunk. He used to tell my siblings, Abel and Abisalom, and I how great a dancer he was during his youthful days, which made many women admire him.

Among them, he settled for our mother who was equally a competitive dancer and vocalist. He advised us to do what we were good at to the best of our abilities for we could get the best of wives through the same.

By evening, Father was exhausted. He slept immediately we got back to the house at Jonsaga.

“Good morning, Son,” he greeted me when woke he up the following morning.

“Good morning, Dad,” I replied.

“I don’t remember what happened yesterday! What did I do?” he inquired.

“You partied and danced and ate at Rose’s party,” I answered.

“Hold it there. I see. Did your Father dance well?”

“Sure. You did. You were the best of all the dancers,” I said. “Many guests, some of whom got up to dance alongside you, enjoyed watching your moves. But the guests weren’t as good as you. By the time Kerry wanted to talk to you, after your dance, you were exhausted.”

“I’ll look for Kerry another day.”

Father wanted to stay in the city for more days. Mother would take over his responsibilities for the time being.

“There is something I would like to share with you, Son,” he sat me down one morning. “There is a task I would like to carry out in the city soon. Allow me to put up with this dirty air of Cannibal for a few more days and see if it affects my health. If it does not, I might change my mind and stay even longer.”

We laughed. That was his way of saying he did not want to leave just yet.

“It is okay, Dad. Feel free in my house. You are free to stay for as long as you please,” I said.

“That is my son; flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood! I salute you, *jowi* (buffalo),” he remarked then got up to accompany his pleasure with a dance; a dance to a song of praise he loved to sing so much to a man who impressed him. He sang and danced.

*Jowi jamuomo mak chunyi
Rawera dokadh kodi
Aduwa jiduto oluore kata an.
Jowi jamuomo mak chunyi
Rawera dokadh kodi
Aduwa jiduto oluore kata an.
Ma koro odoko wuoda okaluore da
Athiano katobiro gi mau
Athiano okanomul wuon go
Jowi jamuomo pile winj duonda
Jowi kata osiai awacho winja awinja pile
Jowi! Jowi! Jowi!*

So, he stayed back in the city a happy man with a dream to rejuvenate and re-acquire his younger self.

“You’ll walk me around more often. I intend to find somewhere with a gym. I’ve seen many people of my age so strong and they say going to the gym is responsible,” Father requested.

“No problem, Dad. Provided you are going to be disciplined and adopt a special diet, you’ll achieve that dream,” I told him.

“I’ve never been undisciplined in my life. You know that, don’t you?” he argued.

“I mean, you’ll have to follow the gym instructor’s instructions. That includes adopting whatever diet he’d advise, even if you have to forgo *nyama choma*—” I explained.

“What? I won’t adhere to that!” he interrupted.

I walked Father through potholed roads of Jonsaga, an estate known for high crime rates and which hosted many low-income earners in its *mabati* structures and a few storey buildings. One morning, after I dropped my boss at work, Father and I searched for a fitness school whose cost would be affordable. We settled for one that was founded by Flexy Fitness School, a Non-governmental Organisation.

Father was anxious to join Flexy Fitness School, which was located on the second floor of a storey building next to Ndururuno Primary School in Jonsaga. He desired to return upcountry muscular and healthier.

He envied his eldest brother, Rose’s father, and how he showed off to the villagers whenever he returned from visiting his daughter, Rose, in the city, with lots of shopping and money. He always looked younger,

lighter in complexion, and healthier. Father used to say, “The town makes my brother more handsome.”

Rose was an affluent and renowned city-based lawyer. She wanted to make it up to her father who had raised her and her brother, Kerry, alone after their mother walked out on them. Rose had always blamed her father for letting their mother go while she was only three years old and Kerry one.

CHAPTER THREE

AFTER JOINING FLEXY Fitness School, Father diligently attended all his lessons however rigorous. After a few days, he made his first friends, Oluga and Kamotho. Oluga and Kamotho, both over sixty years old, craved to be physically fit.

Oluga lifted heavy weights, hoping to defend himself from city bullies-cum-Nairobbers who had stormed Dee Estate, where he resided.

Kamotho's second wife was behind his going to the gym. At thirty years, she was energetic and her blood hot; lusted for heavyweight gymnasts whom she described as energetic as horses in bed unlike her aging husband. She kept pumping the hurting truth into Kamotho each time he got home drunk, and too worn-out to do anything. He wanted to be a hot hunk in K'bangi slum.

One Friday, Father and his friends cut short their lessons early for a drinking spree at Dee. They trekked, and finally halted at Casablanca Tavern.

"Oh! Meet my son, Cairo," Father introduced me. "Cairo, this is Oluga, and this is Kamotho, the friends I told you about."

“Pleasure, sir,” I said, shaking their hands.

Oluga shook my hand noncommittally and said, “Oh, yes. How are you doing, Cairo? Your father hasn’t said much about you other than that he stays at your house.”

“I’m fine, sir,” I replied.

I took the next table, quiet, waiting for Father so we go home together. I followed their conversation but did not contribute to it mainly because they did not ask for my opinion.

After a few bottles of beer, the floodgates opened:

“My son, Ojuok, is giving up in life! He doesn’t know what to do with himself anymore,” Oluga offered.

“How do you mean? He must be a young man, I suppose,” Father commented.

“He is a young graduate of Architecture from the University of Cannibal. He’s thirty two years old. Unfortunately, he’s been working as a casual labourer at a construction company where he earns three hundred shillings a day! Sometimes, he goes home unpaid. I’ve begged him to stay in my house but he keeps rejecting the offer! At least my mechanic job pays better,” Oluga said.

“Well, has he sent letters seeking employment?” Father asked.

“He has made many applications already, which haven’t borne any fruit so far,” Oluga responded.

Father was not convinced: How could it be possible that a university graduate was surviving on a job that I, his son, a driver, could not stoop to?

“Why can’t he start a business of his own instead of such a low-life job?” Father inquired.

“A business idea needs capital—a lot of it, mark you. Banks would not lend him a loan for failure to satisfy The Credits Reference Bureau! The Higher Education Loans Council already victimised him a year after he graduated!” Oluga explained.

“Then give him some money for a simple beginning,” Father suggested.

“You are pulling my leg, aren’t you? I’m on the Credits Reference Bureau list of credit-unworthy as well. I acquired some loan in the past to facilitate his educational expenses, which I’ve never fully repaid to date. I can’t get any more loans as it is,” Oluga explained.

Kamotho kept quiet all that while, neither for enjoyment nor exhaustion, but for his own thoughts which he shared:

“My son, Ernest, is also a graduate of Building and Construction Engineering from the very university. He’s twenty-eight years old. He hustles in a similar company as your son, Oluga, and earns the same

amount as your son per day having graduated five years ago! I was taken by surprise listening to you. I'm only a Form Four welder yet I'm better than my learned son, isn't that a shame?"

"Again! Wonders are persistent! In my village, many graduates are teachers. They get jobs as soon as they graduate. Can't your sons teach?" Father asked.

"Ernest says that his contractor is a man who just got his diploma the other day! In spite of seeking help from my son a number of times, the contractor still dictates how much to pay and when to pay him!" Kamotho said. "A while back I suggested my son's return to the university to further his studies. Maybe he would get somewhere. *Kizungumkuti ni fees,*" he added.

Kamotho was consumed, not only by the toxins of the liquor he had taken but also by another issue; "Bishop Paul's daughter, Rehema, is now the CEO of The Yacht, that consultant firm. When she was expelled from college, Ernest had graduated. Where did she acquire the five-year experience demanded in every advert? She has no certificate from any college! These jobs have their owners."

"You are not drinking. Have more sips of your liquor," Oluga told Kamotho.

"Come on, Kamotho! Say something," Father urged. But Kamotho kept quiet.

“I have never seen children from rich families hustle for jobs the same way our poor children do. In fact, rich children secure permanent jobs ahead of their graduation. Governor Solomon’s son was Ojuok’s classmate in college. Fare Designers, a company in which my son has been applying for internship in vain since he graduated five years ago, employed Solomon’s son while he was a second-year student,” Oluga said.

“Absurd! Commoners only secure common jobs, especially in the police service, upon selling their lungs to gamble for a chance, which is not even guaranteed. Perhaps we should give it a try, don’t you think?” Kamotho concurred.

They drank, said more and complained a lot, but all their claims had occurred in Cannibal; so the city was in the best position to shed light on the same. Maybe Cannibal had turned their sons’ lives into a living hell.

Father said, “The elderly need to style up and stop clinging to jobs like parasites.”

“Why are you mad at them, they are qualified and experienced?” Oluga asked.

“You *juakali* artisans don’t understand the rule of formal employment. I’m out of service, not because I have no experience, but because my retirement age had knocked. Only yesterday it was announced on TV that a retired judge, older than me, was hired to fill the position of a chief of staff of Cannibal State. He welcomed the deed of shame and celebrated the

move with like-minded retirees while young people who are the future of the country suffer like your sons or worse!” Father complained.

“Oh, Judge Philip Kisaka? He termed young people lazy and lost. In his words, ‘the youth must be creative and stop waiting for jobs to follow them; they are wasting their time, they must explore opportunities and convert them into jobs’,” Kamotho said.

Father added, “It is a big shame to live many years and possess little wisdom. Anyway, even fools grow old. That judge is a fool.”

They settled their bill after having *nyama choma*. It was getting late.

“Fare thee well, folks,” Father bid his friends goodbye.

“You too, fox,” Kamotho replied.

“You are only cheap drunkards: Fare thee well, folks; you too, fox,” Oluga imitated and added, “go back to form one, foxes,” he added.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

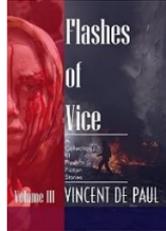
DANCAN OUMA OBUYA was born in Lambwe Valley, Homa Bay County. He attended Okwach Primary School in Kano, Kisumu County, before joining Otieno Oyoo High School and later Homa Bay School. After completing his Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), he joined the Multimedia University of Kenya where he pursued Bachelor of Commerce, majoring in Finance.

Dancan began writing short stories and poems for fun while in the University. City of Cannibals is his first published work.

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